
Child of the Frontier

(1873–1889)

AS HE NEARED HIS NINETIETH YEAR, Barnum Brown determinedly struggled to compile his notes for an autobiography. After decades of racing around the planet in pursuit of paleontological plunder, this project afforded him a rare opportunity to reflect on a life filled with adventure and intrigue. Even his very first memory involved a solitary encounter with a universe that he would later come to revere and explore on his own terms with energy and determination. As Brown described the moment: “My earliest recollection is of lying in a clothes basket under a tree as I looked up and saw the leaves moving overhead. I was probably less than two years old at the time.”¹

What could be more prescient for the most successful field paleontologist in history than to root his perception of consciousness in the wonder of the natural world? Fortunately for Brown, an eye for nature was not unique to him within his family. His parents nurtured his instincts for the outdoors throughout his childhood on the raucous frontier of the Midwest’s rolling hills and grassy plains.

Almost twenty years before Barnum’s birth, his father took a calculated gamble and renounced the relatively settled landscape of the East to strike out for the fabled expanses of the American West. Brown, who in his notes anoints his father as “My Most Unforgettable Character,” admired his father’s sense of adventure, but he also had profound respect for the sense of responsibility that tempered it. As Brown explained,

My parents both came from old pioneer stock: William Brown, my father, was born in Virginia in 1833. He had a deep abiding love for horses and other livestock, for the soil, and for his country. There were those among the pioneers who were merely drifters, fiddle-footed and restless, that wandered westward either to escape an unpleasant situation in the east, or in the hope of getting something for nothing in the west. . . . Father’s pioneering was

purposeful: he was hard working, with a good head for business; he sought and found promising opportunities worthy of the heavy investment of thought, time and labor that he poured into them.

Cognizant of the burgeoning wave of westward migration, and catalyzed by events following the Mexican War and California gold rush in the late 1840s, the twenty-one-year-old William Brown hitched his oxen to his covered wagon and headed west in 1854, the same year that Stephen A. Douglas proposed the Kansas-Nebraska Act establishing the Territory of Kansas. With his eye trained on Kansas, Brown first traveled to Wisconsin by way of a bustling Chicago, with its thirty thousand residents, in order to assess “how the pioneers of the generation before his own had dealt with the problems of *their* frontier.” The rich fields of Wisconsin were already studded with prosperous farms, one of which belonged to Charles Silver, a former army officer who had “fought as a private against Tecumseh at Tippecanoe in 1811.” Silver attained the rank of captain during the War of 1812 and participated in the Battle of Bad Axe in 1832, where he fought against the legendary chief of the Sacs and Foxes, Black Hawk. In the years between his tours in the military, Silver developed a large dairy farm in Green County, where he owned his own cheese house. In 1855, Brown, while accumulating more capital and livestock in preparation for his foray into Kansas, met Silver’s fifteen-year-old daughter, Clara. They married the same year. Four years later, the young couple—now with a daughter, Melissa—

loaded such of their possessions as were not on the hoof into [their] ox-drawn covered wagon, and headed westward. . . . They averaged 10 miles a day on the way to Kansas Territory where, near Licksillet in Osage County, my second sister, Alice Elizabeth, was born on the 4th of January, 1860. Father went from place to place in the Osage County area, sizing up the opportunities. . . . Finally, he picked the spot for his future home on one of the rolling hills. . . . Seams of coal cropped out around its slopes, so the pioneers named it Carbon Hill. . . . Father set to work with a will; they lived in the wagon for the short time it took him to build a log house. The windows at first were greased paper; the tables and chairs were made of boxes and barrels that contained supplies. And they were home!

Although this pioneer family’s home seems initially to have been a happy one, the same cannot be said for the greater region into which they had immigrated. Tremendous tensions were building in the Kansas Territory, especially

regarding the question of slavery. The Kansas-Nebraska Act had repealed the Missouri Compromise, which stipulated that any new states admitted to the union north of latitude 36° 30'N must be “free” states. Stephen Douglas, who was a railway promoter, believed that the citizens of a territory being considered for statehood should have the right to vote, through “popular” or “squatter” referendums, on whether their territory would become a free or slave state. He was also pressing for the first transcontinental railway to run through Chicago. In order to overcome the opposition of southern legislators to his preferred railroad route (they wanted the transcontinental railway to run from New Orleans to southern California), Douglas sponsored the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which southerners favored because it would essentially overturn the Missouri Compromise by letting residents of the Kansas and Nebraska Territories vote on whether to become free or slave states. The population of Nebraska was dominated by free-staters, so little question existed about the anti-slavery orientation of that territory.

But Kansas was a different matter. In his biographical notes, Brown wrote that waves of settlers from both northern and southern states rushed into the region to establish new farms, with many of the “Yankees” being spurred on by “abolitionist promoters . . . specifically to provide an anti-slavery majority.” Violent raids, such as the sacking of Lawrence in 1856 by pro-slavery militias, were quickly followed by retaliatory attacks, such as the one by John Brown in which five pro-slavery settlers were killed along the Potawatamie River.

All these tumultuous events, often referred to as “Bleeding Kansas,” helped bring about the Lincoln-Douglas debates in the Illinois senatorial campaign of 1858, a central issue of which was the question of slavery in new states. Douglas continued to advocate his position of “popular sovereignty,” whereas Lincoln opposed the expansion of slavery into new territories and states. Their widely watched debates, noteworthy for their eloquence, fueled Lincoln’s ascendancy to the presidency in 1860. Shortly thereafter, Southern forces fired on Fort Sumter—the first shots of the Civil War. The effects of these epic events in U.S. history were directly felt on Carbon Hill. Barnum relates:

Kansas was admitted as a Free State in 1861. Raiders of all persuasions, lawless guerrillas and partisans, stole or destroyed much of the crops and livestock. Father saw that he would never get ahead at that rate, so he put adversity to good use. He was a good man . . . with wide experience in wagon-train freighting; he kept close watch on his animals, got good, strong covered freight wagons and a government contract. During the war years

he was home at the cabin during the winter; spring, summer and autumn he hauled supplies from the railheads at Fort Leavenworth and thence by a roughly triangular route to the frontier posts in western Kansas, Nebraska, Wyoming, Colorado, Santa Fe, and back to Osage County. He hauled anything for which the Army gave orders . . . [including] staples such as corn, flour, sugar, and coffee. His train consisted of five enormous covered wagons, each with a capacity of six tons of cargo, and each with its reliable driver of the three yokes of oxen that pulled the loads.

Although the family prospered, William's absence for much of the war years presented numerous challenges for Clara and her two young daughters. In essence, the hostilities in Kansas and Missouri during the Civil War represented an extension of the prewar tensions and violence of the late 1850s. In Osage County, combatants included not only the troops of the Union and Confederacy, but also guerrilla fighters and militias not directly under the command of either formal army. The pro-Union guerrillas were called jayhawkers, a term that lives on as the nickname for the sports teams at the University of Kansas. Their pro-Confederate counterparts were called bushwackers, in reference to their most common tactic, the ambush of opposing individuals or families in rural regions—like Carbon Hill. As Barnum recounts: "Mother used to say that during the War it was not uncommon for Federals to stop for food in the morning, Rebels at noon, and Bushwackers at night. She never dared to say where their sympathy lay for fear of retaliation by shooting the family, burning down their house, or destroying their property."

After the Civil War, changes transformed the region as newly constructed transcontinental and regional railroad lines sliced across the frontier, following the old covered wagon trails. In his biographical notes, Brown explained that the burgeoning rail lines

little by little spelled the end of profitable wagon freighting in the years after the war: the Union Pacific joined the Central Pacific to complete the first transcontinental line in 1869, and by 1880 the old Atchison and Topeka Railroad, chartered in Kansas in 1859, had reached Santa Fe. . . . Father's last freighting trip ended with the home stretch from Santa Fe, along the trail of that name, to Carbondale, close to whose cemetery traces of the old trail could still be seen a few years ago. Gone are the oxen and the men who drove them, but in some unbroken pasture land, in the summer, you can still

see the remnants of the historic trail outlined by a golden blaze of Mexican thistles, the seeds of which had been transplanted by the feet of the oxen.

With peace in the country more or less restored and more time to spend around his homestead, William set about increasing the acreage of his claim and diversifying his farm's productivity. The oxen that had once pulled the freight wagons were now yoked to plows and scrapers in order to clear and tend fields for crops as well as to expose the coal seams for fuel, which the family used themselves and sold to outside buyers. William also sought to enhance the comfort of frontier life for Clara and his two daughters by constructing a more "modern house . . . of brick and clapboards, 'salt-box' fashion, with two big rooms downstairs, bedrooms upstairs under a gable roof, and a large cellar." In time, William came to control 640 productive acres around Carbon Hill, a full square mile that supported "500 head of cattle, numerous hogs, and a fine well of ever-cold water." In an account published by the Carbondale Centennial Association in 1972, Mary Snell and Rosalind Metzler reveal that the Brown home was acclaimed as "the best residence in this section of the country," based on a historical document compiled in 1883. (Unfortunately, as Snell and Metzler go on to recount, the house burned down in 1971, "as a blow torch was being used to remove paint in the process of restoring the old house.")²

This phase of domestic expansion coincided with a population boom in the family. William and Clara's first son, Frank, arrived on the scene in 1867. Six years later, Frank, along with the rest of the family, eagerly awaited the arrival of a third sibling. However, another impending event was competing for Frank's attention, and it would come to leave an indelible mark on the life of the new child. As Barnum's daughter, Frances, explained in the short biography she penned about her father in 1987,

In the early 1870s, the fame of P. T. Barnum had already spread from Brooklyn to the midcontinent. "Barnum's Great Traveling World's Fair" . . . was traveling far and wide. . . . The master showman heralded his approach with posters plastered on barns, trees, town buildings, everywhere a likely spot could be found to titillate public attention. . . . The barns and buildings of Topeka were no exception. Small wonder that the bright eyes of a six-year-old lad [Frank] . . . spied the gaudy pictures. He could dream of no greater delight than to be taken to see the real thing. . . .

An event of greater delight to his parents was the safe arrival of their second son on February 12, 1873. . . . Frank was pleased that he was going to have a



FIGURE 1. Portraits of Barnum Brown and his family taken around 1880, when Barnum was about four and they were living on their homestead in Carbondale, Kansas. The photo of the family is labeled 1881; however, the photo of Barnum, who is wearing the same clothes as in the family portrait, is labeled “? Age 4,” which he would have been in 1877. Front row (from left): Clara Silver Brown, Barnum Brown, Frank Brown, William Brown; back row (from left) Alice Elizabeth Brown and Clara Melissa Brown (AMNH Vertebrate Paleontology Archive 2:5 B1 F1)

younger brother to boss around, a task he felt well qualified to assume after being on the receiving end so long from his older sisters. However, nothing could long hold his attention away from the approaching P. T. Barnum Show. Therefore, when the new baby remained unnamed for several days because the family could not agree on what he should be called, it was Frank who burst in on one of the arguments with “Let’s call him Barnum.”²³

The name stuck, and almost ninety years later, as the boy with the showman’s name looked back on his life, Brown could only conclude: “There must be something in a name, for I have always been in the show business of running a fossil menagerie.”

Although Barnum was a child of the frontier, his early years were anything

but an exercise in loneliness. In addition to his family, a seemingly enormous crew of thirty-one men helped William run the farm, and a local girl was hired to help Clara keep everyone fed, a monumental chore performed daily with spectacular aplomb, especially considering that all thirty-eight dined in two separate sittings in the large kitchen. Summoned by a large bell, the family and crew feasted on

eggs and bacon, pancakes with sorghum syrup, and coffee for breakfast; dinner at noon when the table groaned under steaks, potatoes, green vegetables fresh from the garden or canned, apple butter, jam, pickles, kraut, beans, thick slabs of bread, piles of hot biscuits smothered in honey and butter, apple, peach, blackberry, raspberry or pumpkin pie fresh from the oven—all homemade. Supper at six was another banquet of fricasseed or fried chicken, fried potatoes, stacks of hot biscuits with honey and butter, dessert that was sometimes hot shortcake topped with wild strawberries we had gathered earlier in the day and thick whipped cream. Gallon pitchers of milk stood on the long table. No one ever got up hungry from the Brown table.

Nevertheless, Brown freely admits that life was not all “rosy” on the farm, as livestock losses from “disease, drought, flood, and famine” bedeviled his family’s operation. Brown became acutely aware that “all farmers are gamblers at heart and in practice, whether they know or admit it or not. They gamble on what the coming season will produce, they gamble on what the prices will be for what they can produce . . . but they have nothing to say about the prices of the things they must buy. Lo, the poor farmer!”

Hen cholera and other poultry diseases took their toll, as did an invisible blight on corn in drought years that resulted in black leg, a bovine disease triggered by the ingestion of bacteria living in the soil that caused cows to abort their calves or, at worst, ended in death. According to Barnum’s recollections, drought years were somewhat cyclical, with four wet years “of plenty” followed on average by three years of drought, during which “there would be so little rain that the corn wouldn’t even sprout.” As the wells dried up, “We would watch the primer which checked the amount of water left in the cistern. . . . We frequently had to haul water from Wakarusa, five miles north of us, for our livestock, sometimes making two or three trips a day.”

In wet years, climatic conditions could veer toward the biblical. “One spring,” Barnum recalled, “it rained off and on for forty days and forty nights. Then Berry Creek became a surging river, and much of Carbondale

built in its valley was destroyed. Up on our hill, we escaped the flood. . . . The cattle . . . were so covered with mud that you couldn't tell a cow from a steer, or a Poland China hog from a Cheshire White. . . . Nevertheless, these abnormally heavy rains replenished the ground water and improved the yield of crops next season."

As soon as he was old enough, Barnum was enlisted to pitch in on the daily and seasonal chores. Presumably due to his relative youth and lack of seniority, his first assignments fell under the supervision of his mother. In his notes, Barnum is unabashedly proud of this early supporting role, even though it involved what might have been viewed as "women's work": "[My mother] always said I was the best 'girl' she had, for Melissa was romancing and Alice, who resented being a girl and loved men's work, was raising cattle on her own, helped by brother Frank. . . . So little brother got a lot of housework."

Through his mother's tutelage, Barnum not only learned how to feed a large crew of workers but also acquired a wealth of information about the world of the frontier. In his notes, he rhapsodizes about his mother's love for the animals and plants that enlivened their rugged homestead existence:

Mother liked a happy, cheerful home, and kept native songbirds. Redbirds are notorious fighters, especially with other redbirds that are caged; mother caught a great many by opening a window and placing a captured, caged bird close to it. A wild bird would fly in to . . . attack; mother would close the window, capture it as it flew around the room, and cage it. Redbirds are beautiful whistlers and mother loved their cheery notes. . . . The first notes of the robins and bob-whites mingled with the scent of apple and peach blossoms with the coming of spring; then the meadow larks sang in the pastures while the bluebirds hovered around the house. Later, the woodpeckers could be heard hammering away [on] the telegraph poles.

Part of Barnum's chores as a young boy involved helping to tend his mother's garden:

Mother and I loved flowers. Honeysuckle ran along the white picket fence around the house and yard. She had a large bed of petunias, phlox, red and white roses. Along the lane were oleanders and snowballs. We had pine and cedar trees in front of the house. In back there was a large mulberry tree with delicious fruit that we enjoyed in the summer. Along the walk to the privy were lilacs on one side, and Concord grape vines on a trellis on the other. . . .

In the east corner of the yard was the kitchen garden, where we raised lettuce, radishes, beets, wax beans, onions and sweet corn, between the rows

of which were pumpkin and squash vines. Beyond the yard to the east we grew large quantities of Irish and sweet potatoes, peanuts, popcorn and cabbage from which I made a barrel of sauerkraut each year.

Flipping through the tattered pages of his lightly annotated field diaries confirms the fact that Barnum never lost his love of flowers. For although written notes describing his daily scientific activities are often frustratingly rare, it's not uncommon to encounter the dried petals and stems of pressed plants that captured his curiosity.

As he grew, more physically demanding chores were added to Barnum's repertoire, bringing him under the guidance of his father as well.

When I was about ten years old, I was able to help with the farm work. In the late summer, I sometimes milked 20 cows, morning and night, sitting on a one-legged stool, so if a cow kicked I would fall over without resistance. . . .

During the harvest season, I worked on a corn-cutting sledge; it was V-shaped with a knife blade on each side that cut off the stalks about eight inches above the ground—we didn't have modern harvesting machines. Two of us, one on each side, rode the sledge, which was pulled along between two rows of corn by a single horse.

Barnum's sidekick around the homestead was "Old Bruno, my big curly-shaggy Newfoundland dog." Weighing in at 128 pounds, twice as heavy as Barnum, Old Bruno was energetic and playful, although his energies were often expended on flights of fancy unrelated to chores on the farm, such as scaring up jackrabbits and pursuing them until late in the evening, when, to Barnum's great amusement, he would limp home with sore feet, "all tuckered out." Another family stalwart was the pet cat, Old Maltese, who, though a skilled mouser, suffered from a substance abuse problem: "Old Maltese loved the smell of camphor, and used to get drunk from whiffing it, after which she would stagger around like a drunken man."

Eventually, Frank inadvertently ran the cat over with the mowing machine, cutting off most of one leg, and although he "held the stump . . . to stop the bleeding, and carried her back to the house to get a bandage on it," she could no longer hunt and took to killing Clara's chicks instead. Thus, "poor Frank had the sad task of killing her with the shotgun. So ended Old Maltese, the mighty huntress."

Not surprisingly, injuries on the farm were not limited to the family

pets, and Barnum suffered through his fair share. One year was especially disastrous:

One day when I was about eight . . . Frank dropped an iron mowing machine wheel on my heel by accident, and laid bare the flesh to the tendons. The family doctor came and dressed the wound; I was laid up for three months. Old Bruno tried to lick the wound, and the doctor said it wouldn't do any harm but would have curative properties; at least his gentle tongue was soothing. . . . Before I had completely recovered from this accident, a nail in my shoe caught in the stair carpet one morning causing me to trip and fall down the last three steps, striking my elbow on the door jamb and breaking all three bones in my left arm. There were no X-rays in those days, but with the help of chloroform, old Doctor Wood set my arm as best he could, but it was far from perfect, and is crooked to this day.

Barnum's early education took place in the local two-room schoolhouse about a mile's walk from home, and along with his fellows, Barnum seems only too happy to have participated in the usual pranks: "Professor A. V. Sparhawk was the school principal, a fine man and a good teacher with only one weakness: he chewed tobacco. There was a big stove across the hall from our classroom; he would step across the hall while classes were going on to spit in the stove. We boys, knowing this, always tried to trap him by reciting so long and asking so many questions that he would have to swallow his tobacco juice to answer."

There was, however, at least one burning question that the good schoolmaster could not answer. It arose from an activity on the homestead that would form the foundation of Barnum's legendary career:

Father had about two dozen yokes of big, strong draught oxen that he had used when he was a government freighter. He used these same oxen to pull the plows and scrapers that stripped the overburden of rock from the underlying coal seams that we worked. Sometimes as much as eighteen feet of overlying rock had to be stripped away before the coal seam was laid bare. There were many fossil sea shells and the remains of other invertebrates in all of this overburden. When I was a little shaver, aged five, I was old enough to notice and take interest in such things, and used to follow the strippers in order to pick up all the fossils that they turned up. I collected the fossils in boxes that I took home to put in my bureau drawers. I well remember proudly showing two of my first discoveries to visitors: one a horn- or cornucopia-shaped specimen about three inches long; the other looked like a piece of

honeycomb with the beeswax showing. . . . Later I learned that both were fossil corals that had lived in an ancient sea whose bottom sediments had been deposited upon the coal when the sea flooded in where before there had been dry land with coal-producing forests. Father, though untrained in geology, encouraged me in making these collections, for he thought that by so doing we could find out why sea shells could be entombed in a Kansas hilltop 650 miles from the nearest seacoast today, the Gulf of Mexico. In time, my collection became so varied and bulky that Mother made me take them from the overflowing bureau drawers and put them in the laundry house, which was a building separate from our farmhouse. This became my first museum, where I had my first experience as a showman regaling visitors with these treasures, together with Indian arrow points and scrapers I picked up while plowing our cornfields.

From modern-day geologic maps, it appears that the coal- and fossil-bearing strata on Brown's homestead fall within the boundaries of the 300-million-year-old, Pennsylvanian Wabaunsee Group and probably represent beds within the Severy Shale or Howard Limestone.⁴ Surviving photographs of the coal-mining works around Carbondale indicate that they were extensive operations, not just deep but forming extensive pits. This makes sense, for the cost of shipping coal from the Appalachians into this remote region must have made the locally mined fuel a valuable commodity.

As Barnum progressed through adolescence and his collection of Paleozoic invertebrates burgeoned, the family realized that, if he were to fully answer the riddle of the seashells on their Kansas hill, Barnum would need to continue his education. However, educational opportunities in the local area were limited. The nearby town of Carbondale had a population of only around two thousand during Barnum's boyhood. Its main street boasted of a bank, two churches, some grocery stores, and "two meat markets where you could buy steak for ten cents a pound, with bones, liver and 'lights' (other internal organs) thrown in free for cat and dog food."

The town did sport its own newspaper, the *Astonisher and Paralizer*, "run by two cantankerous veterans of the War Between the States." At the end of his life, Brown still harbored a palpable fondness for the duo's irreverence. In particular, he recalled their entreaties directed at "delinquent subscribers": "Some folks knead bread with their gloves on; others knead bread with their clothes on; but if subscribers to this paper don't send in their dues, the Editors [are] going to need bread without a darned thing on."

The paper kept the locals up on livestock and crop prices and other goings-

on—and of the latter there were plenty, given that the city “boasted eighteen saloons,” which served whiskey and beer to “miners, but not minors.” According to Barnum, attractions also included

Shady Lane, . . . the town’s red light district. One summer day, when business was slack, a well-known farmer, hitching his team to the post outside, made a call at one of these houses. While he was engrossed with the girl of his choice, one of her colleagues stripped off her clothes, unhitched and jumped in the farmer’s wagon, and raced the horses down through the center of town, up onto the hill opposite . . . back again the length of Main Street and on to the house on Shady Lane, stark naked. There were mixed reactions to this enlivenment of an otherwise dull day: The Astonisher and Paralyzer had gratuitous copy for several issues. . . . The chief and most lasting effect was a remarkable upsurge in business along Shady Lane; this proved that it pays to advertise.

Yet despite all the social institutions that the town supported, one key ingredient had yet to materialize: a high school. By 1889, Barnum had completed the final year of schooling that was available in Carbondale. His parents were determined to have him continue the next fall, “but first Father wanted me to see what was left of the Old West before it faded away, to show me some of the places he had been in his pioneer days, and to broaden the outlook of an adolescent farm boy who had never been more than twenty miles from home.”

(The last point seems to be an exaggeration, since Brown also speaks of a trip in his youth to visit his maternal grandfather, the former captain, in Wisconsin. Barnum was clearly proud of his grandfather’s achievements, but when he visited the family farm in Wisconsin, he was appalled to find his grandfather using “his Captain’s sword as a cheese knife! Here, as a boy, I recovered the sword from its ignoble use and kept it with his epaulets, bayonet, and accoutrements.”)

Barnum’s four-month foray with his father into the remnants of the Wild West—designed also as a search for a good spot to set up a new cattle ranch—would be a coming-of-age adventure of epic proportions for the boy. It also provided a glimpse of the role his father had played in taming the frontier. The elder Brown had made his last freighting trip when Barnum was still a young boy: “Standing in one of the wagon beds and stretching up my arms,” he later recalled, “I could just reach the top of the wagon box, but the bows and canvas seemed to tower overhead.” Now he could experience the wonders of the road as a full-fledged partner.

In addition to the reasons that he gives in the story of his childhood, the trip may have been triggered by a legal case involving Barnum's father and sister. On April 25, 1889, Melissa (Brown) Taylor filed a formal complaint warrant with a justice of the peace in Osage County, Kansas, J. M. Pleasant, against her father, William Brown, alleging an act of incest committed eight months earlier.⁵ At that time, Melissa was about to turn thirty-two, William was approximately fifty-five, and Barnum was fifteen.⁶ The complaint reads that, on August 15, 1888, William Brown did

unlawfully and feloniously[,] lewdly and lasciviously cohabit with and carnally know Melissa Taylor[.] he the said William Brown then and there being the father of the whole blood of the said Melissa Taylor and the said William Brown and Melissa Taylor being then and there persons within the degree of consanguinity within which marriages are by law declared to be incestuous and void to wit being then and there father and daughter of the whole blood and the said William Brown did then and there unlawfully, incestuously, knowingly, feloniously, and willfully commit incest in and upon the person of the said Melissa Taylor by then and there unlawfully committing adultery with and having carnal knowledge of the said Melissa Taylor he the said William Brown then and there knowing that the said Melissa Taylor was his said daughter.⁷

An accompanying document of Criminal Action was executed, also on April 25, 1889, by J. M. Pleasant based on the sworn statement described in the warrant, which initiated the legal case (No. 11) involving the State of Kansas vs. William Brown.⁸ The criminal action indicates that the warrant of April 25 was served by a sheriff's deputy on April 26; the deputy then arrested William Brown and brought him to appear before the justice of the peace. The criminal action goes on to document the subsequent proceedings associated with the case. First, on April 26, both William and Melissa appeared before Justice Pleasant after William's arrest. Both parties consented to a continuance of the case until May 8, and William was required to enter into a legal agreement, in the form of a \$1,000 bond (equivalent to almost \$21,000 in today's dollars), to guarantee his appearance at the stipulated date. The document further indicated that if William failed to provide the bond, he would be jailed until May 8. William filed the \$1,000 with the appropriate officials, however, and on the appointed day for the next hearing both William and Melissa showed up with their lawyers; the case was continued until May 17, but Justice Pleasant demanded that William "file

another recognizance in the sum of \$1000 for his appearance at said time, which he forthwith files, with the same sureties as before, and the same is by me approved, and defendant discharged until said time.”

When William failed to appear for his next hearing, the justice of the peace rendered the following statement:

The plaintiff appeared . . . [with her lawyer] P.E. Gregory . . . and the defendant came not and for more than one hour after the time named in said recognizance for the hearing of this cause came not but wholly made default. Whereupon the plaintiff asked that said default be recorded, and the record thereof with said recognizance be certified to the District Court of said county, which is accordingly done and a transcription of the docket entries together with all papers in said cause and said recognizance duly certified is forthwith filed in the office of the Clerk of the District Court of said County. [signed] J. M. Pleasant, J. P.

A document recording the forfeiture of the recognizance was filed by the clerk of the district court in Osage County in the case of *Kansas vs. William Brown* on May 20, 1889.⁹ We have no further documents regarding the case. Thus, at this point it appears that the case was closed upon the forfeiture of the \$2,000 recognizance, which we presume was in some way petitioned for and later transferred to Melissa.¹⁰ It appears that the forfeiture represents either an admission of guilt in the case or an attempt to settle the case without further action. No record of other fines or of incarceration is known to us.

Brown never mentions the incident in any of the documents preserved at AMNH, so we have no evidence to indicate how he felt about the alleged crime or the case. However, it is clear that he retained a high degree of respect for his father, as evidenced by his own story of his childhood. It seems circumstantially suggestive that shortly after William forfeited the bond, he and Barnum set out to roam the west in search of a new homestead to start a cattle ranch. Furthermore, although there is no connection between the two events, it is interesting to note that Barnum would similarly flee for the field when, in 1919, he got entangled in a less pernicious, yet still somewhat scandalous, legal case involving an apparent lover.

In any event, in the late spring or early summer of 1889 Barnum and William customized a “light spring wagon” and rigged it with a canvas covering supported by bows. A trunk bolted to the back of the bed contained extra clothes, and a “grub box” on top of that held supplies of staples, includ-

ing “sugar, bacon, flour, meal, beans, raisins, coffee, and so on.” Cooking was done with a sheet-iron stove that was lashed on top of the grub box, along with a “pan, kettle, coffee pot and skillet.” The bed of their souped-up wagon was lined with hay and a canvas covering to form a sleeping mattress. Horses could be fed from a feed box bolted to the back of the wagon, and a canvas sling strung underneath served as storage space for dried cow chips that would be collected along the way and burned for fuel. As Brown proudly recalled more than seventy years later, father and son then “took leave of the family, hitched our team to the wagon, and set off on my first expedition.”

They usually rose before sunup, and while his father fed and harnessed the team, Barnum rustled up breakfast, usually “coffee, bacon, and such eggs as we could buy or gather along the way.” After washing the dishes, the boy, sheltering from the morning chill, would huddle under the blankets as his father grabbed the reins and took to the road. A brisk pace for the first few hours ensured that they could stop at midday when good land for grazing came into view. After lunch, they renewed their trek until they found good grass in the late afternoon; they would then unhitch the horses and Barnum would prepare a somewhat repetitive dinner of beans, bacon, and eggs. When they were in Indian country, they chained and padlocked their horses to the wagon wheel at night.

Traveling along the Middle Loup River in Nebraska, the Browns had to keep moving to avoid run-ins with the large cattle companies, which monopolized the range and did not appreciate travelers grazing on their grass. In the Sand Hills of Cherry County, “rattling gunfire like that of a skirmish line” at first aroused their concerns, but it turned out to be only “hunters shooting Prairie Chickens that lived in the tall grass bordering the waterways and lakes” for shipment to lucrative markets in the east.

Back when William had run freight for the government during the Civil War and immediately afterward, bison were still a common sight on the plains. “When his scouts used to tell Father of a great herd . . . coming toward his wagon train they would circle to make a corral out of the wagons, placing the oxen and horses inside so that they would not be carried away or destroyed by the surging herd. Father told of other times when he saw great herds . . . streaming across the Missouri River in such numbers as to stop the river boats.”

But beginning in 1865 with the construction of the transcontinental and more regional railways, “companies hired men to kill off the bison. Together with the hide hunters and barbed wire, wholesale slaughter and separation

of the great herds reduced the former countless millions to 541 in 1889. . . . But they had been exterminated already from the country we were to pass through. . . . We saw only their heads, preserved by the long shaggy hair and tough hide, strewn across the prairies like small barrels.”

In northeastern Wyoming, the government stagecoach that ran between Deadwood, South Dakota, and Billings, Montana, blew by them, powered by a team of four sturdy horses as it transported “mail and passengers at the rate of sixteen cents a mile.” Shortly, the Browns approached the site of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, which had stunned the nation on the eve of the nation’s centennial when more than 250 soldiers of the Seventh Cavalry under the command of Major General George Custer were killed by some 2,000 Sioux and Cheyenne warriors led by legendary chiefs, including Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, and Gall. Ironically, as Barnum and his father neared the battlefield just thirteen years later on the Fourth of July, an Indian guided them to the ford of the Bighorn just in time for the Crow’s reenactment of the battle.

Although this tribe had always been friendly to the whites, the Commandant was taking no chance, so he had two companies of the garrison under arms, and two Gatling guns trained on the battleground.

I well remember the occasion: squaws with papooses on their backs or in their laps sat all around the edge of the battlefield. . . .

We camped there beside the river that night. Little did I dream lying there in our covered wagon, that I would be camped in this same region not many years in the future, searching for fossil dinosaurs for the American Museum of Natural History.

Their odyssey then continued westward along the Yellowstone River, past Billings and present-day Livingston, to what would become the north entrance of Yellowstone Park, just above Mammoth Hot Springs, which still steams and bubbles today as it did then, creating a popular destination for park visitors. Although a troop of U.S. cavalry was stationed there, the Browns had no luck in supplementing their diminishing supply of provisions, because regulations prohibited the quartermaster from selling goods to anyone. So they carried on, following the Yellowstone River up to its headwaters at the lake; along the way, Barnum succeeded in catching “great numbers of lake trout, averaging two pounds apiece, sometimes getting two with one cast.” Fried in bacon grease, then salted and placed in a keg, the fish provided a welcome break from the pair’s habitual diet of eggs, bacon, and beans. It also gave them some bartering power. As Barnum recounted,

This was wild country in those days, and [the troopers] were not even allowed to go hunting or fishing for recreation. On our return trip, the Commandant heard that we had some fish, and offered to exchange any provisions that we required for the fish. . . . The trout made a welcome change of food for the troopers, and we needed the fresh provisions that the Quartermaster couldn't sell to us. Where there's a will, there's a way! One of the things we got was a luxury: a big jar of pickles. We were starved for something sour, and I ate all my share at one sitting.

Reluctantly, after their idyllic sojourn beneath the snow-capped peaks of the Rockies, Barnum and his father began the return trip through Billings before heading south along a different trail toward eastern Kansas. "There were more new sights and every day was a fascinating adventure. And then we were home again with our loved ones. We had traveled about three thousand miles at an average rate of twenty-five miles a day when we were on the march. It took us a little more than four months from start, to finish. What an experience! This was Father's finest gift to me; it was of himself."

It doesn't require much magnification to read between Barnum's lines and see why he felt his first foray into the fields of the western frontier was so valuable. Brown's early life prepared him for his successes to follow. His sense of awe at "seeing new sights every day" inspired a wanderlust that he would seek to satiate for the rest of his life.

Even more directly, Barnum's childhood can be viewed through the same experiential prism. None of the individual events that he recalled in his unfinished autobiography, except perhaps the trek to Yellowstone, comprised anything but the normal activities of a typical frontier upbringing. Nonetheless, they paved the way for a remarkable life spent predominantly in a determined search for fossils across both familiar and foreign landscapes in almost every corner of the globe.

Serendipitously, his father's choice for a family homestead site was blessed with intriguing fossils and geologic strata. These sowed the seeds of curiosity that quickly sprouted in the young boy's fertile mind, nurtured by the encouragement of his father and by his mother's practical love of the natural world that surrounded them. The daily and seasonal chores of managing the farm, from caring for livestock to driving the wagons and other farm equipment, provided Barnum with an extended tutorial for living and traveling in rugged and remote regions. Helping his mother to cook and care for the large crew of field hands and strip-miners fostered Barnum's ability to feed, man-

age, and organize large crews of diverse characters in his later fossil-collecting operations. The business acumen that he absorbed from his father enabled him to carry out shrewd financial transactions during his expeditions for the museum and during reconnaissance for oil and mining companies. Last but certainly not least, his three-thousand-mile odyssey in a covered wagon, launched at the insistence of his father, must have indelibly tempered and reinforced Barnum's prodigious skills and instincts for taking reasonable risks in his later quests for elusive fossil quarry, hidden among inhospitable and uninviting badlands throughout the world.