

William Henry Bassett

by

William (Bill) Kay Bassett, grandson

William Henry Bassett was the third of nine children born to Charles Henry and his second wife, Mary Elizabeth Knight Bassett. Little is known of his early years, except that he spent them in Salt Lake City attending whatever schools were available there in the 1860's. Like his father before him he became self sufficient at an early age. He was entrusted to manage a branch ZCM located at Cedar Fort, Utah, a new settlement just East of Lehi (approx. 40 miles Southwest of Salt Lake City. It must have been a bustling community because of Camp Floyd, and Johnson's Army, and his father had been posted there by Brigham Young (I don't know why). In October 1876, at the tender age of 18, he married a local girl, Murette Cook (daughter of Henry Freeman Cook the local Bishop). He remained at Cedar Fort for the next four years where his first four children were born: Lutie Murette, Wm. Grantly, my father Harry Freeman, and James Clarence. Cedar Fort was exactly that, a fort, built of rock for the protection of the Saints against Indian raids, about a half acre square and "wide enough for a steer to walk on top the walls", according to Aunt Lutie. IN her history she remembered many "Indian Scares" and the children being snatched up in the night and carried into the fort for protection.

By 1880 activity at Cedar Fort had declined, the ZCMI store had closed, and William Henry (better known now simply as "Will") was persuaded by his half brother, Charles Henry Jr., to join his in Southeastern Idaho where he had homesteaded (in 1878) and was developing farming and cattle operations near Grace. He wanted will to file on a homestead adjacent to his, but Will's first reaction was that "he would not have the whole damn territory if it were given to him". CH Jr. persuaded him, however, with the argument that if he didn't file for it there was a Dane who was going to (evidently a fate worse than death) so, out of brotherly concern, Will filed site unseen. The area was known as "Gentile Valley" sometimes called "Bassett Valley" (later there were three Bassett ranches there). It was a beautiful valley with a mountain backdrop and a trout filled stream meandering through lush meadows, a big contrast to the semi-desert area around Cedar Fort.

Initially, however, Charles Jr. (better known as simply "Uncle Charlie") had difficulty making a living on the homestead so he took a temporary job on the new Utah Northern Railroad coming into Idaho. At this time the scenic wonders of Yellowstone Park were becoming well known all over the world, and Charlie and Will saw the need for a stage line to carry passengers, freight and mail from the railhead at Beaver Canyon, in North central Idaho (near the present towns of Spencer and Dubois) into the Park, and were able to persuade the RR to give them the contract. Another older brother, Charles Julius (better known as "Jules"), had also moved to Idaho earlier and was very involved in early Idaho politics, and a personal friend of Idaho Governor Dubois. With that connection, the brothers were able to get the necessary contracts and licenses, formed a partnership, and the "Bassett Brothers Stagelines" was established. Two other brothers, Fred and Frank, came from Utah to join them. The Bassett Brothers became the largest stage coach operators in the area with 25 coaches and surreys, traveling over a 350 mile round trip, carrying freight, mail and passengers; including many congressmen and other dignitaries from the East, and even royalty from Europe, all anxious to see the Park.

The Bassett Brothers Stage Lines operated from 1880 through 1889, and became quite famous. The brothers had many harrowing experiences with stagecoach hold-ups and Indian raids and traveling over the most difficult roads and terrain. The families lived in Fire Hole Basin (in the Park) during the summer months and I recall my Aunt Lutie telling the story of the women doing the family laundry in the hot waters of the basin while the children swam. They also maintained a large number of horses there. In the winter, when stage travel into the Park was impossible, they moved their families, and horses, back to Cedar Fort for the winter, until the houses were built on the homesteads in Gentile Valley.

Later Will opened a mercantile business and filed for a post office and was appointed the first valley post master. He named the area "Sego", because in the spring the hillsides were covered with Sego Lilies, but his "S" looked like an "L" on his application to the US Postal Department, so it came back with the name "Lago". But that was OK with Will. It was Lago from then on. Will built a beautiful home, opposite that of his brother Charles, and opened the store and post office. This became the social center of the valley and many came to hear the stories of the famous Bassett Brothers Stage Line experiences. Will, being a great storyteller, loved to hold forth near the old post-bellied stove in the store. I envy my older brothers who were able to sit at his feet as he spun out stories of holdups, Indian raids, dignitaries and royalty. I just wish someone had written something down.

The only piece of written narrative regarding William Henry was found on an old yellowed newspaper clipping, dated January 1881, either from the Salt Lake Tribune or the Deseret News, repeating a letter written by Will to his father in S.L.C., headlined as follows:

THRILLING EXPERIENCES

"Alone on a Montana Prairie three days and two nights"
 without food or water – snow three feet on the level"
 "The life of a mail carrier in a houseless country"

The following is the greater part of a letter received by Mr. Charles H. Bassett from his son William H., who is in the mail service in Northern [actually southern], Montana. The young man is but 22 years of age, and the simple non-effected manner in which he relates his thrilling experiences shows that he not only possesses a great deal of courage, but also a great deal of genuine manliness:

"Virginia City, Mont., Jan 22nd, 1881.

Dear Father:

In answer to your questions, I will endeavor to give you some particulars. At the time I wrote to Mother (December 1st) I was snowed in at Fire Hole Basin and was there about ten or twelve days. Two of us succeeded in getting over the mountain with three horses and snowshoes, and we arrived at River Side Station that day. On the day following, Marshall, the boss, came in from Henry Lake with two men and fifteen horses. They had been six days on the road, a distance of thirty miles. He then ordered me to start out the following morning on horseback for the lake. I objected and told him I thought it impossible for a horse to get through, and asked for a pair of snowshoes. He then became very angry and said he would

not send me if he did not know I could get to the lake safely. I started out on the morning of the 16th with the best horse but I had traveled not ten miles before the animal was unable to carry me, and I had five miles further to go before I could reach some haystacks on the prairie. By considerable hard work I led the horse to the haystacks after dark. I was entirely worn out, so I took my saddle blankets and crawled into one of the haystacks for warmth and to rest, but fell asleep and did not awaken until daylight. I started again, but only succeeded in traveling one mile that day, as the snow was so deep (about three feet on the level) that it was impossible for the horse to travel. I was then in a canyon and found wood, so I built a fire, and was so tired that I slept all night again and froze my feet still more (but I forgot to say that I froze my feet the first night at the haystacks). I dare not take off my boots to inspect my feet, for fear that I could not get them on again. I had discovered by this time that my horse was good for nothing, so I started him back to the hay, and started out on foot, calculating to make the lake by night, which was fifteen miles further on. The lake was frozen so I started across it to shorten the distance, but I soon found my mistake, for when I started on it I broke through, and I got out only by hard scrambling, and was then on the ice wet and freezing. There was about two feet of soft snow and I could hardly walk. The station was on the other side of the lake, and by swinging my hat I attracted the stock tender's attention, but not too soon for I fell down exhausted, unable to take another step. He dragged and pushed me on my snowshoes, and took good care of me.

I had spent all this time, three days and nights without a mouthful of food or water. I had eaten snow until my throat was so raw I was unable to eat a full meal for a number of days. I used arnica on my feet but the boys thought I would lose my toes, if not my whole feet, if I did not get down here (Virginia City) to get medical advice. Hearing that the company team was eighteen miles this side of there with supplies for here, I concluded to start for it in company with two mail carriers. This eighteen miles to be made on snowshoes, but I mustered up courage enough to start out. No one can imagine what I endured on that trip. My feet were so raw that I . . . (the rest is lost). (From Bill Bassett, grandson)

(Obviously there is another page continuing this story, but I couldn't find it. I assume he was carrying the mail all this time, and that it got through. I don't know if he lost his toes. He later explained that he crawled into the haystack head first to keep warm, but if he'd had his wits about him, he would have gone in feet first – inferring that he thought his feet were more valuable than his head)

Another story, unwritten for obvious reasons, and told later by some of “the boys” relates to the “infamous” side of the Bassett Brothers. It pertains to their horses, Chinese poachers, and the law of the west. It happened near one of the way stations where a number of company horses had disappeared, one by one. An investigation revealed that, in a canyon not far away, an encampment of Chinese immigrants, recently laid-off from the copper mines near Butte, were keeping themselves alive on horses with Grandpa's horses. The brothers rounded up the “boys”, road into the canyon and administered “The Law of the West.”

The railroads finally extended their homes into Wet Yellowstone by 1889 so the stagecoach business became unprofitable. Jules moved to Boise and became Secretary of State of Idaho. Will and Charles spent their last years in the farming and livestock business in Lago. Will, with my father Harry, also ran the Lago store and Post Office and was the local dealer in heavy farming equipment. Both Will and Charles became deeply involved in Idaho politics; Will as a Bannock County Commissioner and Charles a Chairman of the Board of

Commissioners for the country, serving six terms. Three more children were born to Will and Met (Marette) in Lago; Saphronia in 1887, Roscoe (Ross) in 1891 and Adelia Dubois (Aunt Deal) in 1894.

Further from Aunt Lutie's history: "Horse back riding was a pleasant pastime. She remembers her father and mother galloping down the road lined with stately pines. What a striking couple they were, mounted on beautiful horses, mother in fancy riding habit riding sidesaddle. English saddles, of course. From this I get the impression that Will fancied himself as more of a "country squire" than a typical Idaho rancher.

William Henry Bassett, my grandfather who I never knew, died on December 29, 1929, in Pocatello, Idaho. I was 4 years old. He died as the result of an automobile accident near McGammon, enroute to Pocatello for an appointment with a stenographer, ironically for the purpose of dictating his memoirs. The Pocatello Tribune published a three-column tribute to his life entitled "Bassett – Lived Long in Idaho – a Tribute to Memory of Widely Known Citizen", the last paragraph of which is worthy of repeating here"

"The three Bassett Brothers are well known to all old timers of Southern and Eastern Idaho because of their business and political activities.

William H. (Will to his friends) was always counted on and never failed to sit in councils, take part in deliberations and influence the policies of his party; his community will long remember and honor "Will Bassett". His kind heart, his cheery, friendly disposition, neighborliness, and brotherly kindness to his friends and his community at large were such that no tablet will be required to keep fresh his memory in the minds of all who knew him."

He may have had a cheery friendly disposition with his friends and neighbors, but my older brothers and sisters remember him as a very stern task master with his children, especially the boys. All three left the ranch at the earliest opportunity: Harry (my father) to Pocatello and the UP Railroad, James Clarence to Los Angeles to be a Hollywood stage set carpenter, and Ross (Roscoe) to the automobile business in Ogden, Ut. So everything was left to the daughters. The oldest, Aunt Lutie, wife of Hyrum Swensen, took over the store and post office and moved it to the front of her home on the Swensen ranch. Aunt Deal (Adelia), wife of Alfred Hansen, inherited the ranch along with the stately old house. It is an interesting irony that his beloved ranch wound up in the hands of a Dane after all.

The old store building and the home, which had been the center of all commercial and social activity in Lago for over 60 years, are no longer there, the house having burned to the ground some years later and the store having been sold and torn down for the lumber. There is no longer a store or post office in the valley and the town of Lago is no longer on the map.

By his grandson, William (Bill) Kay Bassett