

Sketch

Volume 25, Number 2

1959

Article 9

The Long Road

Ed Hill*

*Iowa State College

Copyright ©1959 by the authors. *Sketch* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
<http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch>

The Long Road

Ed Hill

Abstract

Tod leaned over the side of the wagon and watched the big wheels grind into the gritty dirt...

The Long Road

TOD leaned over the side of the wagon and watched the big wheels grind into the gritty dirt. The heavy iron rims pushed deep into the road, leaving shallow grooves after the dirt spilled back in. He picked up a few grains of wheat from the floor of the wagon and dropped them carefully into the front track, then walked back to the endgate and frowned as the rear wheel crunched down.

"Mom, will wheat grow on the road?"

Jane Tinney clucked to the horses and pulled a wrinkle from her dress.

"Not like it does in our fields. The road's too dry and hard."

Tod grunted as the wagon bounced over a rock. He went to the front again and held on to the seat. His denim trousers and shirt had been clean this morning, but were streaked with yellow dust now. An old felt hat, made to fit with a leather cord around the crown, kept his neatly combed blond hair in place. He blew sharply through the gap where his front tooth had been and looked at his mother when the horses perked up their ears.

"I can whistle, Mom. How far is it to the station?"

Mrs. Tinney turned to the boy. Her once pretty face was creased and brown, although she was not old. She dusted off the front of her faded calico dress and tucked a wisp of straight brown hair under her pink bonnet. Her thin lips parted briefly in a smile, and she straightened Tod's shirt collar.

"Not far. We'll be there in a little bit." She slapped the reins against the broad rumps of the two big bays. The wagon lurched ahead, then the horses settled back into their slow, rhythmic walk.

"Mom, will he be waitin' for us? How does Dad know we're comin'?" Tod climbed over the rear of the seat and sat down, his boots swinging against the sideboard.

"He'll be there, Tod. Mister Dobbs said he'll be comin' on the train today." She shifted on the high wooden seat.

"Mom, why didn't Mister Dobbs let me go in the house when he talked to you?"

" 'Cause he didn't want you askin' questions, I reckon." Mrs. Tinney slumped forward a little bit. "Tod. . . can you remember your father?"

The boy stared out across the sprawling foothills of grass and sagebrush. His eyes narrowed, and his knuckles showed white against the scarred sideboard.

"I think he was big and had a quiet voice. Dad was awful good, too." Tod turned to his mother. "How old was I when he went away?"

Mrs. Tinney rubbed her hands against the well-oiled reins. "Yes, he is a good man. I hope you can be like him, Tod." She nodded slowly. "You weren't much more'n a baby when he went away. He was right proud of you."

Tod looked more closely at her and spoke hesitantly.

"Why'd he go away, Mom?"

She stared at the winding road and did not speak. Tod waited for a moment, then took the reins from her hands and slapped the horses. The hot afternoon sun glared against the sandy road, and Tod pulled his hat lower over his eyes.

A sudden breeze fanned his cheek, and a dusty little whirlpool crossed the road in front of the team. The horses were too tired to do more than raise their heads, and Tod was glad they had not shied. The breeze died down, and tight waves of heat steamed up from the land.

Mrs. Tinney put her hand on the boy's knee, and he looked up quickly.

"Tod, your father is a fine man, . . . the finest I ever knew. Jim would do anything for someone he loved." Her eyes were bright. "After you came along, there wasn't enough money to go around. Your father took some money that didn't belong . . . to him. Not very much, but the law sent him away."

Tod looked away from his mother. He scraped his boots against the wagon front and studied the easy motion of the horses. His left hand hung over the edge of the seat, and he

(continued on page 27)