

UNFINISHED AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF JOHN ROWAN

WRITTEN IN 1841 AT FEDERAL HILL, KY.

I propose, now that my life of sixty-seven years must be drawing towards a close, to leave behind me for the gratification of my children, a plain narrative of the principal facts and incidents with which it was connected, or influenced, from infancy up to this time. They may consider it an autobiography, written, not to gratify the vanity of the writer--he has no vanity, he never had any, he was always too proud to be vain--but to gratify their desire to know the line of their parentage, which desire is a natural impulse of self love. If it is not a duty, it certainly is not wrong to gratify it. It is in that spirit this narrative is commenced, and will be conducted to its close, if it shall ever be closed.

I was born in York County, in the State of Pennsylvania. In that county and in the same neighborhood were born my mother and father. My father, William Rowan, was the son of Irish parents. My mother, Elizabeth Cooper, was a Quaker lady, the daughter of wealthy and respectable parents, but whence descended, in reference either to parentage or country, I never learned, or, if I did, have forgotten. My mother was about five feet seven inches high, and possessed that beauty which a good constitution and good health gives to symmetrical conformation without the civilities (which are called accomplishments) of a modern education, hers was the "sano mine in sano corpora." She combined with the most attractive placidity of

mien and deportment great firmness and equanimity, of which illustrious instances will be given in the course of this narrative.

My father was a man of fine personal presence. His stature was a little over six feet, and finely proportioned. His mind in volume and natural vigor was of the best order. His education was confined to the English language. He was naturally eloquent, especially in eulogy. He received, while Pennsylvania was still a colony, the appointment of High Sheriff of his native county, of which office he was in exercise when the colony declared her independence and formed her constitution, where upon he was elected High Sheriff of the county and re-elected successively for three several years--that being the longest period of tenure which the constitution of the State accorded to that office. Those were the first three years of the Revolutionary War, in which he was engaged with ardor, and at the head of a volunteer company repaired to the theatre of action, and remained in service for six months, the period for which the company had volunteered - returning to the duties of his Sherriffcy, in the exercise of which he was led by his benevolent and generous cast of mind and feeling to impair, in the relief of others, his own and my mother's very ample fortune.

At the close of the war, in the view and with the hopes of repairing his shattered fortune, he emigrated from Pennsylvania to Kentucky (then a district of Virginia) in the wild lands of which he had without any knowledge of the laws of Virginia, or of the nature of the titles to land in Kentucky,

invested the little remnant of his fortune. On the tenth day of October, 1782, he sailed in a flat bottomed boat, of which he was the owner, with five families of emigrants from the Monongahela River, near the mouth of Redstone Creek, for the Falls of the Ohio River. At that time there were no persons residing on the Ohio, or near it, on either side from Wheeling to the Falls of the Ohio. The whole distance was one entire, unbroken wilderness, inhabited only by savages and they at deadly hostility with the whites. The boat had been constructed with the sides higher than a man's head, of plank too thick to be perforated by a rifle ball, and with post holes for defensive operations in case of attack.

Our family consisted of our parents and five children - three sons and two daughters - the sons the eldest, of whom I was the third and not nine years old. We expected a voyage of not more than six or seven days. We started with provisions for a voyage of not more than that length. It was intended not to go on shore between Wheeling and the Falls, except occasionally to take on fuel for cooking, etc. and cane for cattle. We landed for purposes of that kind about 25 miles above the mouth of Little Kanawha River, when it was suggested by one of the passengers that it would be well to take out the cattle that they might exercise their limbs and joints while they were browsing on the cane. It was objected by my father, that the river had fallen much and was continuing to fall rapidly and might become too shoal for navigation. It was replied by the passenger, who professed to be acquainted with navigation of the river, that there was no danger of that

kind to be apprehended. My father acquiesced, the cattle were taken out and turned into the cane and a deep snow having just fallen, fires kindled on the bank for purposes of cooking and warming the children who were frisking about like birds just escaped from a cage. During which my brother Andrew, who had just entered the 13th year of his age, obtained from some one of the passengers the loan of his rifle without the knowledge of our parents, and went into the forest elated with the hope of killing a deer. He had never carried or shot a gun of any kind. When we were about to return to the boat and commence our voyage he was missing. We were detained of necessity. He had not, as he afterward told us, been long in the forest before he saw, shot at and wounded a large buck. Transported at the sight of its blood, and anticipating its speedy death, he pursued it with an ardor and intensity which excluded all other thoughts. Having pursued it until nearly nightfall he was awakened to his condition by the haziness of approaching darkness and reluctantly gave up the chase. He knew not where he was, or in what direction the boat lay. He had never before been in the woods beyond the precincts of a populous neighborhood. He had left the low grounds, or bottom lands of the river, and got far into the hills without being conscious of it. To return upon his track seemed to him to be too tardy a mode of getting back. He was on the margin of a small r  vulet, when he became sensible of his condition, which he supposed flowed into the Ohio some short distance below the boat. He determined to pursue the little stream to the river, and go up the river to the boat. Though jaded with the previous

chase, he started on end ran down that stream until it united with another and larger stream and down that until it lost itself in another and still larger, which to save the circuitry occasioned by its curvatures, he frequently waded, until darkness and exhaustion arrested his career. He took shelter under the curvature of a large fallen tree, dropped into a profound sleep amid the howling of innumerable (as he supposed) wolves around him. The night was intensely cold, and he saved his feet from freezing by pulling them into the crown of his hat before he fell into sleep. He awoke some time after sunrise and pursued his course down stream all day, when just before night he found himself upon the bank of the Little Kanawha River, and as the river was covered with ice, he was unable to ascertain the direction of its current. But still the Ohio was on his left. He took up the river and travelled in that direction some five or ten miles when, by the swiftness of the current upon a riffle or shoal where the water was not frozen, he saw its direction and turned down, pursuing it to its mouth. He took up the Ohio and about twilight on the third day came into camp, during all which time he had neither seen fire nor tasted food. The men who had been sent by father in search of him had pursued his track for two days and given up the pursuit under the conviction that he must have been devoured by wolves, or perished of cold and hunger. Happily for the feelings of the family, he had arrived the evening before the day of their return. His feet and legs were greatly swollen and discolored by the effects of the frost. They were immersed, at the suggestion of

mother, to the knees in a tub full of whiskey, and continued in a state of immersion for some hours, whereby it was believed they were preserved from the crippling effect of the frost. He lost only the first joint of each of his great toes, and sustained no other injury, it would seem; for he grew to be a very large, robust and athletic man. At maturity he was 6 feet  $2\frac{1}{2}$  inches high and well proportioned. He is still alive and in vigorous health. I was then too young for much observation or reflection, but remember to have been struck with the profound but calm and, (as I now suppose) Christian-like grief which marked the countenances of my father and mother during the absence of my brother. They were both Christians, not in profession only but in fact. Now did they upon his return displaying anything like a tumultuous joy but a joy mixed with gratitude to the Almighty in whom they had trusted during his absence and by whose kind providence they verily believed he had been preserved and restored to them. I remember well their reasoning. It was thus - "Our child has been raised tenderly; he has never suffered from cold nor from hunger; on the contrary, parental vigilance and tenderness had always guarded him sedulously from even a conscious sensation of either; caressed and pampered, as it were, on the bosom of civilization and the lap of affluence and ease, how could he had sustained and survived the hardships and privations to which he was exposed, without the assistance of the merciful and providence of God. A child of his age, instead of struggling with cold and hunger and fatigue in

the midst of a savage wilderness, alone and without knowledge of his way or of the woods, unaided from above, instead of persevering through two nights and three days, would in the first night, have let himself down in despair and cried himself to death." They were profoundly grateful to Heaven without making clamorous display of their gratitude. On the evening of the day of my brother's return, or restoration as my parents called it, we recommenced our voyage, but we made but little way. The river had fallen and become sluggish, and our progress was somewhat retarded by floating ice, and by the time we had descended to the mouth of the Great Kanawha was entirely arrested by the frozen condition of the river. We encamped as comfortably as possible on the margin of the river somewhat back from the shore, and remained until the breaking up of the ice in the Spring. Having set out with a store of provisions for a seven day's voyage only, we suffered greatly from hunger; our only reliance for sustenance was upon the game of the forest. But the game had been hunted during the fall by the Indians and the woods burnt, as was their manner upon leaving hunting grounds, whereby the greater part of the game which they had not taken was driven back from the river. Besides, there were no experienced hunters among the passengers, and my father's pursuits and habits of life had given no aptitude for success in hunting, had the deer and buffalo been as numerous as formerly. We were of course, reduced to extremity for victuals at several periods during our stay at that place, having been two months without bread

and frequently experienced intervals of some length with but very little mean, and that of a very inferior quality. Three of the families left the boat at the mouth of Limestone Creek (now Maysville) who, in passing from that point to some station in the interior, were attacked ( as we afterwards learned ) by the Indians and most of them massacred. We landed at the Falls (now Louisville) on the 10th of March 1783, just three months from the day we set sail.

The appearance of the river, and the immense, unbroken continuity of the forest growth which had not then been profaned by the hand of civilization impressed upon my childish mind ideas of the majesty of nature which are still vivid and uneffaced by the occurrences of my after life. The western wilderness seemed to be the abode of nature and the surface of the Ohio River the place where, or on which, she delighted to shed in silent majesty her boundless grandeur, and the swans, geese, brant, and even smaller water fowls seemed to move, swim or fly as if conscious of her august presence. I have often in my latter years in sailing from Wheeling to Louisville, found myself unconsciously employed in tacitly contrasting the present with the past appearance of the intermediate region. The aspect inflicted by cultivation with that worn by nature before she was deformed by art. What art may do in the course of one thousand years I cannot foresee, but I do not hesitate to say that it will tax her most tasteful energies during all that time to compensate for the ravages she has already made upon the beauty and grandeur of the scenery of that river. But I have digressed. After remaining in the



neighborhood of the Falls during that summer and the following, my father, about the middle of April in the <sup>S</sup>pring 1784, descended the river from Louisville, taking with him five families with the intention of settling at the long Falls of Green River upon land which he had bought before he left Pennsylvania and to which he supposed he had good title. The point upon which he proposed to settle, or in other words, to erect a fort, was nearly one hundred miles by computation at that time from

Valley, in which there were two or three forts, and they constituted the nearest settlements to the proposed settlement of my father.

The route by which he intended to reach the Long Falls on Green River, and by which he arrived at, was down the Ohio River to the Yellow Banks at which place the families and the cattle were to debark and travel through by land, a distance of about twenty-five miles, and the boats were to pass down to the mouth of Green River and ascent that river by means of the back water from the Ohio River. But before I proceed further with my narrative, I must notice an incident which occurred during the night before we reached Yellow Banks. I have called it an incident; I should rather have called it a scene, as the boats (for there were two, one for the families and the other for the cattle) were floating silently along the middle of the river at about nine or ten O'clock in the evening-- such an evening too, as attracted, by its beauty and serenity and its clear starry vault, even my puerile gaze and admiration-- the light of a fire was discovered on the Indian (now Indiana shore) a great distance ahead. And presently other fires were

seen, and again others, lining the bank at short intervals for at least half a mile. My father ordered the two boats to be lashed, or fastened together, and assigned his post to every man (there were but seven men and two boys--my two elder brothers--nine guns in all). He directed the boats to be placed (by rowing) with as little noise as possible within one third of the width of the river, from the Kentucky shore, thereby placing us at the distance of two thirds of its width from the Indians, and without the reach of their balls. He entertained and expressed the hope that thus we might glide by them unperceived and unmolested. But he charged them most emphatically that, if the Indians discovered and attempted to board, they should not fire upon them until they came within powder-burning distance, and he charged them further and still more emphatically, if possible, that they should not utter a word or sound above their breath. That they should maintain a profound and perfect silence; that by this course the Indians might be left to apprehend that our numbers were great, and that we wished them to attack us. Everything having been arranged according to orders, we were gliding along silently and had passed two or three of the upper fires unperceived by the Indians, and were tacitly solacing ourselves delusive that we should entirely escape their observation, when suddenly the war whoop was raised and the most hideous yells were uttered and answered from fires along their range of camps. We were hailed in broken English, ordered to come to their shore under penalty of the most dreadful destruction. The utmost silence was maintained on our part, not an oar was pulled, not a word was



uttered. Even the cattle seemed to have comprehended the injunction to silence imposed by my father--they were unusually still. The Indians repeated their terrific yells (and like wolves each could make the noise of half a dozen) and rushed to their canoes. For each camp there seemed to have been a canoe. They rushed towards us, and the noise of their paddles seemed, as they approached us, to increase the horrors of their shouts.

At this moment my mother arose from her seat, and without saying a word even a whisper to anybody, collected all the axes and placed one by the side of each man, beginning with my father, and then sat down in silent composure, retaining an ax for herself. The other women of the boat had lain down in despair and pulled their beds over their faces and heads.

Having hovered in our rear and sides at a respectful distance for nearly two miles, they gave up and returned. We continued to sail during all the night and the forepart of next day, when we arrived at the Yellow Banks.

The orders of my father were scrupulously obeyed throughout the whole of this appalling scene. Not a sound was uttered, nor a movement made, except the locomotion of my mother in collecting the axes and the disposition of them as stated above. I omitted to state that, as she placed each of the axes with the poll upon the bottom of the boat and leaned the handle of it against the side, she touched man by whom she placed it with the handle to apprize him of the presence of the weapon. In reflecting upon the arrangement made by my father and the commands he gave to his associates in that awful crisis, and their strict observance of them, I am at a loss which most to admire,

his composure and sagacity, or their firmness and acquiescence-- both seem to me without a parallel and greatly to be admired. But when I reflect upon the horror of the scene, the darkness of the night, the overwhelming number of the Indians as evidenced by the displays they made, and especially by the number of their fires along the bank, their voluminous and fearful yellings, I know not in what terms to speak of the composure and presence of mind which my mother exhibited in the part which she acted on that alarming occasion, the horrors of which can only be fancied--they cannot be portrayed.

She had been raised most tenderly, apart from all hardships and dangers. She had no masculinity of character. In the domestic and social relations she was all woman, soft, mild, gentle and kind; she performed all the duties of wife, mother, mistress, and neighbor with habitual placidity and almost imperturbable composure of mind and feeling. Domestic and retiring in her habits, the proclivity of her temperament was to sympathy and benevolence. That she should merge and play of that character has every time I have reflected upon the subject excited my wonder and admiration. Nor am I able to account for the exactness with which, in my puerile condition, I noticed the occurrence of that fearful night as they transpired, unless upon the theory that there are some persons whose powers of mind are concentrated by extreme danger, and others (the larger portion of mankind) whose powers of mind are paralyzed by extreme danger. Upon this theory, if it be true, (and I believe it is), and upon this only can I account for my mother's great composure and presence of mind, and for the

power of observation which my own boyish mind retained and used that night.

But without further theorizing (into which I have been led by my almost idolatrous veneration for the memory of my mother), I proceed with my narrative. We arrived at the Long Falls of Green River on the 11th of May. The boats having gone around by the mouth of that river had not yet arrived. We erected camps, or rather pitched our tents, upon the northern bank, and set about preparing timbers for cabins and stockading. On the second night of our arrival the Indians stole all the horses belonging to our little colony. They left us without horse-power - a power which seemed almost indispensable for drawing together the timbers for house and cultivation, but it was gone and we could not without horses return to settlements in the interior of the country. We were, therefore, under the necessity of remaining and of doing the best we could under the circumstances. We did, without horse-power, build houses, or rather small cabins, and fortify ourselves by stockading, and we did, though not that season, clear fence and cultivate small truck patches. In the course of the summer and fall the flour and bread stuff which we had taken with us became exhausted and we had raised no corn; we had to depend entirely upon the game of the forest for subsistence. Happily buffalo, deer, bear, elks, turkeys, geese, swans, etc., were very plentiful, and during the winter there was safety in procuring it, for the Indians, afraid of being tracked in the snow, did not make incursions into the country. The want of horses upon which to bring in the game when it was taken was a

great inconvenience. We hunted mainly as near the river, below and above the settlement, as game could be found and brought home in canoes.

In February and the beginning of March we took bears enough from the holes in large trees, in which they had hibernated, for bacon until that time next year. These bears were in great plenty and very fat--much fatter than hogs from the pen of the farmer fattened and slaughtered for bacon. We found them by examining the large trees of the forest, and where we found on the surface of the tree the ascending prints of their claws and no descending prints.

The bear when he has ascended a tree and found a commodious hiding or sleeping place does not again descend until winter has passed away, but cleans it out and betakes himself to repose. In descending the tree, he rakes or scratches the surface, so that it is easy to distinguish between the ascending and the descending marks of his claws. When the former marks only are seen, the tree is felled and the bear is taken. In this way an abundance of bacon and great quantities of oil which supplied the absence of butter and lard for all culinary purposes and for the frying of fish in which Green River abounded more than any river I have ever known. The greater abundance of fish in this river is probably owing to the greater average depth of the water than that of any other river in America, or perhaps the world. Shortly after our arrival at this place (now Vienna) I was attacked with rheumatic pains in all my joints, which rendered me useless and almost helpless for about nine months, in spite of the hundred and one specifics for that complaint

which float from tongue to tongue among the common people, all of which were tried upon me without effect. It was believed that pulverized brimstone taken in honey aided by a naturally good constitution and my youth banished my rheumatism and restored me to perfect health and an expert hunter, contributing my full quota of slaughtered buffalo, deer, elk, etc., etc., to the sustenance of the little colony.

In the month of August, September and October we, each year, were visited by shaking and dumb agues most afflictively. There was neither doctor, lawyer nor parson in our colony, nor were there any law officers. And while that continued to be the case we had no disputes about property, no controversies about religion and no deaths by disease.

Our whole materia medica consisted of a little weed we called Indian physic, a decoction of which was taken as an emetic, of pills made from a decoction of white walnut bark, used as a cathartic, and a decoction of dogwood bark, used as a tonic, and slippery elm bark.