A COUNTRY BOY BEGINS LIFE IN PITTSBURGH

BY

HENDERSON GEORGE

Henderson George was born on a farm in Liberty Township, Mercer County, Pennsylvania, on June 16, 1838, residing on the farm until nineteen years of age when he left for Pittsburgh to make his way in the world. It is this journey and his early experiences in Pittsburgh that he describes in this article. Some years after the close of the Civil War, in which he participated, he removed to Indianapolis, where he became a merchant and where with his family he still resides.

BREAKING HOME TIES.

After my experience in the chair shop at Mercer and return home, work was taken up on the farm as usual which was continued until the next year. I had a dislike for farming and could not think of making it my life vocation. I loved the country and country life, but somehow there was the feeling that I was not adapted physically to the rugged work required on the farm.

During the year I made up my mind to go to Pittsburgh and make an effort to secure a place as salesman in some line of business. This was quite an adventure for one who had never been away from home. In arriving at this conclusion I was probably influenced to some extent by the Morrison boys, for we had frequently discussed among ourselves our future plans and projects.

It was at this time, (September 1857) that John W. Morrison, who was about sixteen years of age, received by mail an offer from his brother-in-law, Mr. John Haworth of Pittsburgh, of a position in his store. Mr. Haworth was a photographer and in connection with this business he was also a manufacturer and dealer in photographic supplies. Young Morrison accepted the position and agreed to leave home for the city in a short time.

The news of this offer to John, brought me to a final conclusion to go to the city with him, although I had nothing in prospect, and did not know whether employment of any kind could be found. The fact, however, that John had
been raised in a city (Philadelphia) gave assurance which was felt would be of great advantage in my first experience as a stranger in a strange city.

DEPARTURE.

Accordingly we laid our plans and set Thursday September 9, 1857, as the day of our departure for the city. The day previous arrangements were made and our stage fare of two dollars and a quarter each was paid, and all preparations undertaken for the journey of about fifty five miles. My few belongings were packed in a carpet bag, and that evening I bade the home folks goodby, and with carpet bag in hand went to the village home of the Morrisons to await the arrival of the four-in-hand stage coach.

The arrival of the coach was not expected before two o'clock the next morning and it might be an hour later. This uncertainty made it necessary for us to sit up in order to be ready when it came. The long waiting period of six or eight hours was put in socially, part of the time singing. I remember some of the songs we sang that night were "Oh! Willie We Have Missed You;" "Lillie Dale;" "Annie Laurie;" "Love's Old Sweet Song;" "Robin Adair;" "Home, Sweet Home;" "Long, Long Ago." Our choir consisted of seven voices; the Morrison boys, Hugh, John W. and William J., and the writer; the young ladies were Bessie and Katherine Morrison, and Mary Jane Taylor. We all were in a sentimental mood at the thought of parting, and it may be that some of the songs were sung through diffused tears.

SOUND OF THE BUGLE.

With us as far as Pittsburgh, on their way to Philadelphia, were Katherine Morrison, and Mary Jane Taylor. At two-thirty o'clock the sound of the bugle was heard as the coach approached from the north. We were immediately in action "Breaking Home Ties," bidding goodbye with tears on the part of our lady companions, and solemn thoughts on the part of John and the writer. We entered the coach, the driver cracked his whip and the four-in-hand was off.

We passed such familiar places as McKnights Mill, the village of Centerville, (now called Slippery Rock), and at sun-rise arrived at the Stone House, seven miles on our
journey. The Stone House, to us, was a place of considerable interest; in earlier times, it had gained the reputation of being the rendezvous of thieves, robbers, counterfeiters, and murderers. It was on the border of a wild and broken country, and many wierd tales went forth from its stone portals. At this point our horses are exchanged for fresh ones; ascending just beyond the Stone House, there is a long rough rocky hill the bane of teamsters and stage drivers. Up this hill John and the writer concluded to walk, partly to relieve the horses of our avoirdupois, and to see the surroundings and benefit our robust health by the exercise.

BUTLER.


Our next stop was at the town of Butler. We arrived at about nine in the morning, twenty miles on our journey. After a brief stop and the exchange of horses we proceed on our way through the Butler Glades and arrive at Bakers-town near the northern edge of Allegheny County. This is our last exchange post; we are within sixteen miles of our destination. At five in the evening we are at the head of Butchers Run Valley down which we descend into the city of Allegheny. Butchers Run Valley is a sort of butchers paradise; the slopes of the long descending gully are lined with a cheap class of houses and were mostly inhabited by butchers who did their own butchering for the Pittsburgh and Allegheny markets. Butchers Run Valley was most unsanitary; offensive odors filled the air; sanitary laws were not thought of at that day.

At the outlet of Butchers Run Valley our coach turned westward along North Avenue to Federal Street, thence southward along Federal Street to the St. Clair Street bridge, (the old original covered bridge) over the Allegheny River, crossing which we are now in the city of Pittsburgh. Continuing through the city our coach finally landed us at the St. Charles Hotel situated at the southeast corner of Wood Street and Third Street (Now Third Avenue). This is our destination; here at six-thirty in the evening our party took supper.

The train that was to carry our lady friends to Phila-
A country boy begins life in Pittsburgh

delphia, left the Grant and Liberty Street Station at seven-thirty. Soon after leaving the dining room the railroad “bus” was announced and the ladies took passage to the railroad station. To see them off, John and I concluded to walk in order to save the quarter that it would have cost each of us to ride. The station was about ten squares from the hotel; and in order to keep in sight of the “bus” as it rumbled over the cobble stone streets, we were obliged to follow in “dog trot style”, and when we arrived at the station we were pretty well outwinded. We saw the girls safely on board the train and as it pulled out, (this was the first time I had ever seen a locomotive or a train of cars) we waved a final farewell. The locomotive was a small affair compared with the great “mogols” of to-day, but was resplendent in its dress of burnished brass, and as it moved out of the station “chugging” with flying sparks from wood fuel, and the street lights glinting upon it, it was to me an interesting sight.

Our mission to the railroad station being accomplished we walked leisurely down Liberty Street discussing the question of where we should stay for the night. Our “pockets were light” and we concluded that it would be too expensive to go back to the St. Charles Hotel; but being strangers in the city we did not know where else to go. John suggested that we call on Mr. Haworth, his brother-in-law, at his boarding house on Smithfield Street. We chanced to meet Mr. Haworth on the street and I was introduced to him. After some casual conversation my friend inquired where we could find a cheaper hotel than the St. Charles; Mr. Haworth suggested the Red Lion, situated on St. Clair (now Federal) Street near the entrance to the St. Clair Street bridge, and directed us how to find it. We found the hotel without difficulty and registered for the night. The hotel was a popular stopping place for farmers and country people, and in this respect was quite congenial to the writer—a green country lad.

As a friendly act John proposed to stay with me for the night.

BUYING A SUIT OF CLOTHES.

The next morning we left the hotel at seven o’clock. The sun shone through the smoky atmosphere, the streets
were thronged with people; trucks, drays, and vehicles of all descriptions were rumbling over the streets. As I looked upon the scene of my first experience in the city I was deeply impressed; it seemed as if a new world had opened before me—I was captivated.

As we walked up St. Clair Street I mentioned to John that I would like to go to a clothing store to purchase a suit of clothes to replace the country garb I had on. Walking along slowly John volunteered a word of advice, telling me that the clothing business was mostly in the hands of Jews, and that they would probably ask double the price they would finally accept.

We came to a clothing store at the intersection of Market and Liberty streets. It was the custom of the ready-made clothing dealers to keep a man on the outside pacing back and forth in front of the store, who acted as a sort of monitor to invite people, as they passed, into the store. He could always distinguish the men from the country, in fact they were his special mark; and he never failed to offer a warm greeting and a familiar pat on the back as the ruralite passed by. This is just what happened to me as we came in front of the store. I was not, however, so unsophisticated as to fail to understand the motive.

He very politely invited us into the store; we went in; a suit was selected and I inquired the price. He said he would sell me the suit at the low price of twenty-one dollars. I replied that the suit was all right and I would take it at six dollars. At this he threw up his hands gesticulating and saying, that such an offer was nothing short of robbery &c. "Very, well," said I, "You do not have to accept it, I will look farther," and turned to leave. He called me back and with a confiding air said, "If you want that suit you can take it for ten dollars." "No," said I, "My offer is six dollars, if you cannot sell it at that price I will look farther." "I cannot sell it for such a price" he replied in a rather indignant tone. "Well" said I, "You don't have to," and started to leave. He again called me back, and in a whisper, said, "You may have the suit for nine dollars." I thought for a moment and then said, "I will split the difference and make my offer seven-fifty," and again started toward the door. He called me back a third time and said, "All right you can take the suit."
Of course the suit was cheap in price; it was also cheap in material and make up. The clothiers had a sliding scale of prices, and in the clothing business there was wide latitude.

Donning the new suit which was far from a good fit, (there is an old ambrotype among my relics made the day after the suit was bought) I was ready to go with John to the store of his brother-in-law Mr. John Haworth at number 64 Fourth Street (now Fourth Avenue). We walked down Market Street which was thronged with people and vehicles, and through the crowded market to Fourth Street and east along Fourth Street to the store which was in a building next door to the Bank of Pittsburgh. Mr. Haworth's place of business was on the third floor of this building, over the Commercial Library. Here we again met Mr. Haworth and the subject of my obtaining a situation was at once talked over. Mr. Haworth kindly gave me a note of introduction to his brother-in-law, Alexander Bates, who was the owner of a retail dry goods store at the northwest corner of Market Street and the Diamond. With this note in my hand and directions as to the location of the store the place was easily found.

THE BATES STORE.

It was now eight o'clock in the morning. Entering the store I found it full of customers; approaching one of the salesmen I inquired if he was Mr. Bates. "No," he replied, "Do you wish to speak to Mr. Bates in person?" I said "Yes". He then pointed him out to me.

Mr. Bates at this moment was busy serving a customer. In the meantime I was looking around. What impressed me most was the throng of customers and the lively business that was going on. The store was not large, probably about twenty feet by eighty, and was connected by a stairway with the floors above, up and down which people were walking; passenger elevators were not brought into use until many years later.

The bald headed person pointed out to me as Mr. Bates having finished with his customer, it was now my opportunity to speak to him. With some trepidation I stepped up and inquired if he was Mr. Bates, to which he responded in the affirmative, when I handed him my letter of introduc-
tion. After reading it and looking me over he inquired if my parents lived in the city. I replied, that they did not. Mr. Bates then said he could make use of a good stout young man to open and close the store, sweep out &c., but added “As your parents do not live in the city we could not pay you wages sufficient to justify you in paying board; we pay one dollar and fifty cents to a boy starting in with us—but come back on Monday morning and we will let you know what we can do.” This was on Friday morning, the day after our arrival from the quiet scenes of home. I felt encouraged with the interview, and confident that something would come of it.

SEEING THE TOWN.

Friday and Saturday were taken up in walking about the city, taking in scenes that were new and interesting to a country lad. I was specially attracted by the animated traffic going on along the Monongahela River front. At this period steam boating was in the high tide of its glory; the iron road had not yet begun to affect it.

The Monongahela River front was more than a mile in length, the wharf was paved with cobble stones from the curb of Water Street down to the edge of the water. The sloping wharf was probably two hundred feet in width. Along the length of the wharf, scores of one horse drays, a peculiar two wheeled type of vehicle, were delivering merchandise for shipment or carting away stuff that had arrived. Boats departing were laden with a great variety of merchandise, including glass, cotton cloth, farming implements, iron, bacon, drugs, flour, leather, liquors &c., for ports down the river as far as New Orleans. Most of the boats also carried passengers; on the trip gambling was the pastime; the river was infested by a class of men known as blacklegs (gamblers); robbery and murder were not uncommon. Boats racing with one another was not unusual, and they were recklessly fired to the danger point.

Boats arriving brought in sugar, molasses, bailed cotton, &c. I was curious enough to count the number of steam boats moored along the wharf and found the number to be one hundred and twenty four. Boats ready to depart were blowing their steam whistles as a signal, while boats arriving were also screaming a signal of approach. The loading and unloading of the boats was done by gangs of
negro roustabouts or stevedores. As each gang labored under the eye of an overseer they droned a monotonous song under a song leader, that was quaint and wierd.

The next day was Sunday. While I was strolling about, the church bells began to ring; it was half past nine; I concluded to go to the nearest church which happened to be Presbyterian. Entering I found myself in the midst of an animated gathering of children and young people assembled for Sunday school. It was soon noticed that I was a stranger, and a gentleman came and spoke to me and inquired my name, and invited me to his class to which I assented. Later I learned that the church was the Third Presbyterian; it stood at the southeast corner of Fourth and Ferry streets. Incidentally I was told that the church building covered the spot where the great fire of April 10, 1845 started. The conflagration swept eastward and destroyed many squares of buildings in the principal business district of the city, and was a notable event in the history of Pittsburgh.

GETTING TO WORK.

On Monday morning September 13th, filled with anxiety and suspense, I entered Alexander Bates' dry goods store and reported to the proprietor. He spoke to me kindly and said, "We have considered your application, (I learned afterwards that he had inquired of Mr. Haworth as to my standing and character) and can make use of a strong, willing, active young man who is not afraid to work, and can make himself useful. The special work which we will require of you will be to open and close the store, sweep and dust, deliver packages &c. We require the store to be opened at five o'clock on market mornings, that is on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, and on other mornings at six o'clock. We close the store each evening except Saturday, that being market day, when we do not close until about ten or eleven at night. You will be permitted to wait on customers when not engaged in your particular work. Now if you wish to take hold of the work as outlined, and think you can render efficient service, we will start you on trial at a weekly wage of three dollars." I told him I was very glad and willing to accept the offer and do the best I could.

Mr. Bates then introduced me to two or three of his leading salesmen and told me I could go to work at once.
HARD WORK—LONG HOURS.

I was highly pleased at my success in so soon obtaining a position. The work, however, I found to be strenuous. Getting up at five in the morning and putting in the long day of about sixteen hours was a tiresome task; neither was the labor light. Opening and closing the store required taking down and putting up about twenty-five heavily paneled nine-foot shutters, and piling them at the side of the building, about fifty feet distant. Then the delivery of packages throughout the city was no small job. This work was done on foot; delivery wagons were not in use by any of the stores, and there were no street cars. It was my duty to carry the only store key except the one carried by Mr. Bates. The responsibility placed upon me, coming all at once, was felt in a flattering sense, and I was proud of it.

HARE'S HOTEL.

Having secured a position, my next move was to find, if possible, a place where my weekly salary of three dollars would pay for room and board. At the Red Lion Hotel, where I first stopped and was still staying, the cost was quite beyond this limit. Samuel Hare, who during the year 1846 came out from Pittsburgh with his family of three boys and two girls, and kept the "Tavern" in North Liberty, had moved back to Pittsburgh in 1850 or 1851, and I had heard was in the hotel business.

The thought came to me to look up the hotel and make a friendly call, and incidentally inquire for rates. I knew Mr. Hare by sight, but was too young to have had any personal acquaintance with him while he lived in the village, but knew his three sons, John, James and Robert, who were near my own age.

Calling at the hotel to "see the boys," I met John the eldest who was acting as clerk. Although a period of more than six years had elapsed he remembered me with a very friendly greeting. After some casual conversation about old times, I told him I had come to the city and had a position in a store, and was looking for a place to room and board, and asked what it would cost me per week at the hotel. After a little thought he replied, "We will make you a rate of three dollars."

This price was much less than I expected, and was
below the regular rates. His offer was accepted, and my carpet bag was moved from the Red Lion to Hare’s Hotel. This hotel like the Red Lion was a popular stopping place for country people.

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HOW THE HOTEL WAS RUN.

The location of the hotel was on Liberty Street directly opposite the mouth of Fifth Street, (now Fifth Avenue) in the heart of the business district. The Liberty Street front was about fifty feet, the building having a depth of probably two hundred, and was four stories high. On entering from Liberty Street one came first to the office, lobby, and bar-room. Back of this was the dining room which had a depth of more than one hundred feet, and was furnished with three long dining tables. The lobby was separated from the dining room by folding doors which were closed except at meal time.

Near the hour for meals, the patrons, transient and regular, of which there were always a large number, assembled in the lobby waiting for the dining room doors to open, like a crowd before the door of a theater. As soon as the doors were thrown open the patrons rushed in pell-mell and occupied seats at the dining tables; at the same time a large Chinese gong was pealing forth a nerve distracting noise. At six o’clock in the morning a man was sent along the various corridors and hallways beating the gong to awaken the sleeping guests.

At night when a patron wished to retire he called at the office and was given a small lamp filled with “burning fluid.” (coal oil had not yet been discovered) and a man was sent along to show the guest to his room. It was quite an effort to climb the long stairways. The lamp carried by the guest gave out a sickly blue light, barely sufficient to see the time on the face of a watch dial.

Only the lobbies, dining room and parlors were lighted with gas. The price of gas to consumers was three dollars and a quarter per thousand feet. The guest rooms even of the first class hotels were not piped for gas. The bar of Hare’s Hotel dispensed only whiskey, brandy, gin, and wines; it was considered beneath the dignity of an American barkeeper to sell beer; beer saloons, and beer gardens were
kept mostly by Germans, in German localities, and were held in rather low repute.

FURTHER EXPERIENCES.

Becoming somewhat inured to the work required at the store, it was felt that the responsibility placed upon me was at least being fairly well met. Mr. Bates found that this country lad could be relied upon to accomplish any ordinary task required.

I was always prompt in opening the store at the early hour of five o'clock, and putting the store in order for business.

Two or three of the salesmen were expected to be on hand when the store was opened, in order to wait on early customers. If they failed to appear on time, which was sometimes the case, it was necessary for me to drop my own work and wait on the customers. I remember one morning of selling a silk dress before any of the salesmen arrived, the bill amounting to thirty-two dollars. A custom that was prevalent in nearly all the stores, was for each salesman to make out his own sales ticket, going to the till and making his own change.

ADVANCEMENT.

After two months service in the store my weekly pay was increased to four dollars, and at the same time John W. Morrison and the writer arranged to keep bachelors hall in a vacant part of the building occupied by Mr. John Haworth, rent free. This arrangement served to keep our living expenses down to less than one dollar each per week; this was continued throughout the winter of 1857-1858.

When spring came our bachelors' hall was given up; in fact we were tired of it, and glad to make a change.

My salary was raised to five dollars per week, and room and board were secured at the house numbered 202 Smithfield Street, we each paying two dollars and fifty cents a week.

Having now been with the Bates store for nine months my pay was increased to six dollars, and at the same time
I was promoted to the full rank of salesman. I, however, still had the responsibility of carrying the key, and of opening and closing the store, but was relieved of the work connected with cleaning and keeping the store in order, except to see that my successor did the work satisfactorily.

After a year and a half from the time of taking employment my weekly pay was raised to seven dollars, and at the same time I was placed in charge of the shawl room. That was the day of shawls for both men and women. On the part of men I suppose it was a fad. Men almost universally, young and old took to wearing shawls in place of overcoats, and the women instead of cloaks or wraps. Wearing shawls among the men continued for several years and gradually disappeared. But for many years, shawls continued to be worn by male students in colleges and seminaries, because of their convenience in going to and from class rooms.