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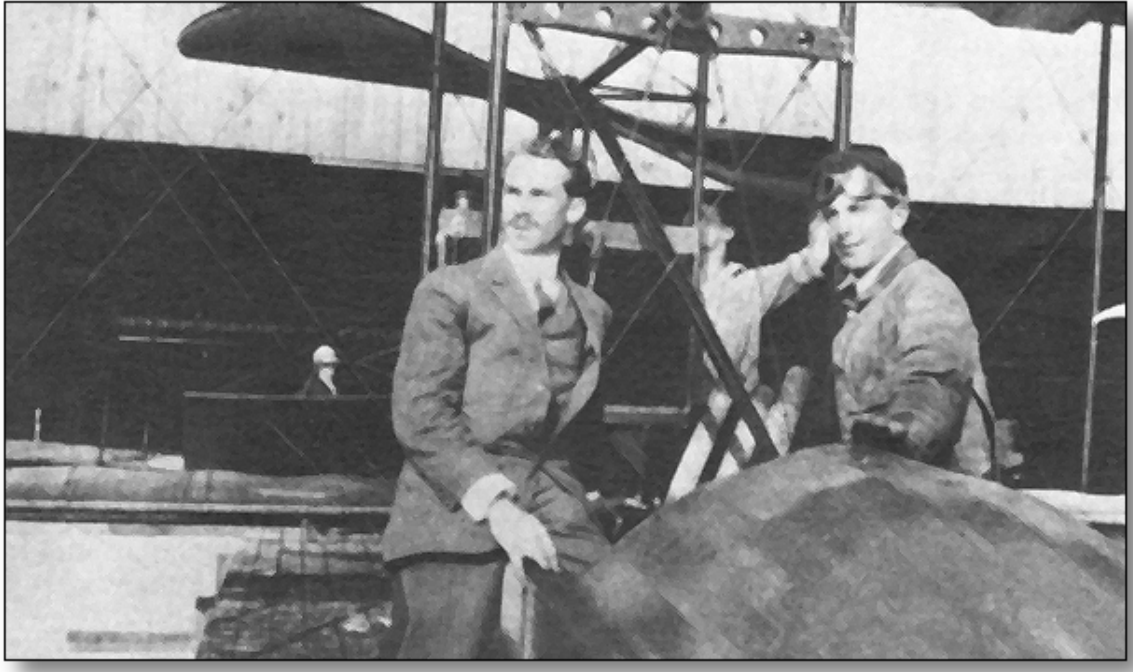
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Rob Russell on left with famed pilot Tony Janus

(courtesy of Hampton Dunn)

AN UNCONVENTIONAL AND DEMOCRATIC PICNIC

By Marian B. Godown

A picnic, as defined by Webster, is either an outing with food usually provided by members of the group and eaten in the open or a pleasant and amusing experience.

Both of these definitions are fully illustrated in the following account of *An Unconventional and Democratic Picnic* which took place almost seventy years ago in the semi-wilderness of De Soto County, about twelve miles south of Arcadia. The lively report of the fun-filled, over-night excursion in March, 1912, was written by Robert (Rob) Russell, six years before he was shot down behind German lines in the First World War. Russell, a pilot in the Royal Air Force, was buried in the British Military Cemetery at Tournai, Belgium.

Rob Russell and his brother George, who was fifteen at the time of the Picnic, were two of nine children of Thomas F. Russell. A member of the New York Cotton Exchange, the senior Russell in 1895 bought a half-interest in the Lawndale Grove at Fort Ogden, including a house that had been built nine years before. Later, he bought the entire grove, renaming it Sunny South Farms.

Two of the Russell children are still living, Anna and Elizabeth, and they reside at the pioneer Russell dwelling. The wood-frame house is believed to be one of the oldest in the county as so many of the others went up in flames. Their father used the building as a hunting lodge, staying at the place for a few weeks at a time. Rob Russell ran the grove while he lived there until the First World War. George took over the management after he returned from Army war service. He died in 1962. Another brother, the late Joseph A. Russell, was a partner with Elizabeth in managing the 100-acre grove. Anna Russell, a former research librarian at Columbia University, and Elizabeth became year-round residents in 1957, but they have been back and forth to the grove all their lives. They barely remember their older brother, Rob. Elizabeth manages the grove today.

Of the twenty-eight at the picnic, four are still living: eighty-five year old Morris Daughtrey of Punta Gorda and his sister, Kate Smoke; Mary Ida Duffy of Tampa; and Curtis Johnson of Fort Ogden. Mrs. Smoke, the widow of Dr. Wallace Smoke, is ninety-one and lives in North Fort Myers.

Apparently, participants at the picnic formed one big, happy family. Many were kinfolk or good friends who had grown up together in the small Fort Ogden community. Besides Curtis, his family members in attendance included: his parents, Mary and Sid Johnson; his grandmother, Mrs. J. O. Carr; his uncle Tull or Tully; his aunts, Edla Carr (later Mrs. Robert Morgan), and Mrs. J. A. Duffy; and his cousins, Mary Ida and Joe "Buck" Duffy. In addition, there were three pairs of brothers, Robert and Ray Morgan, sons of Eli Morgan, railroad depot agent at Fort Ogden; the Russell boys, and Morris and John Daughtrey, Jr. (nicknamed "John Tiger"), who had arranged the picnic. (Pioneer cattleman John Daughtrey, Sr. and his wife Rebecca had seventeen children.) Fluella and Doris Dyess were sisters.

Young Curtis, who was to emerge as the hero of the picnic for "catching" a twelve-pound snook without benefit of hands, remembers the fun he had. He was about twelve years old. He recalls it rained some, but mostly he remembers the time spent walking, cooking, eating and singing about the campfire.

His father, Sid Johnson, was foreman of a local citrus packinghouse for many years while his grandfather, J. O. Carr, used his own schooner to transport groceries and supplies from Pensacola in west Florida to the picturesque Peace River in southwest Florida. He also operated a general store in which he kept money for his fellow townspeople in his large safe.

In 1912, Fort Ogden had more bustle than it has today as it was a trading center for shipping citrus and cattle on the two railroads intersecting the town at that time. It boasted over ten stores, among them: a blacksmith shop, barber shop, hardware store, poolroom, drug store, dry goods store, and five general stores. There were also Baptist and Methodist churches, a school, citrus packinghouses, and a post office which has been in continuous service since it was established in 1876.

Fort Ogden is probably the oldest officially recorded site in De Soto County. Named for Captain Edmund Ogden of the 8th U.S. Infantry, its history dates back to 1841 when it was first established on the banks of the Peace River as a short-lived post during the Seminole Indian War. After having been moved three times, the town now rests three miles from its original location. One year after residents enjoyed this memorable picnic, the town was incorporated as a municipality. Later, its status was upgraded to a full-fledged city but in the Great Depression, the City of Fort Ogden was abolished by the legislature.

Rob Russell's description of that long-ago picnic captures the life-style of the early days of the 20th Century in this tiny dirt-road community on the sprawling south Florida frontier. It was an era of simpler pleasures and home-spun fun. For diversion, the early settlers square-danced, went camping or on outings and found enjoyment in visiting and eating. Their social life also revolved about the church. In the recital of the excursion, there is no mention of present-day conveniences such as refrigeration, bathroom facilities, running water, lights, air-conditioning, television or instant take-out food.

Although business has moved away and most of the stores are empty, Fort Ogden remains home for many long-time residents. They treasure their traditions. That is why during the first Sunday in May of each year, people gather in the park for a nostalgic May Day picnic.

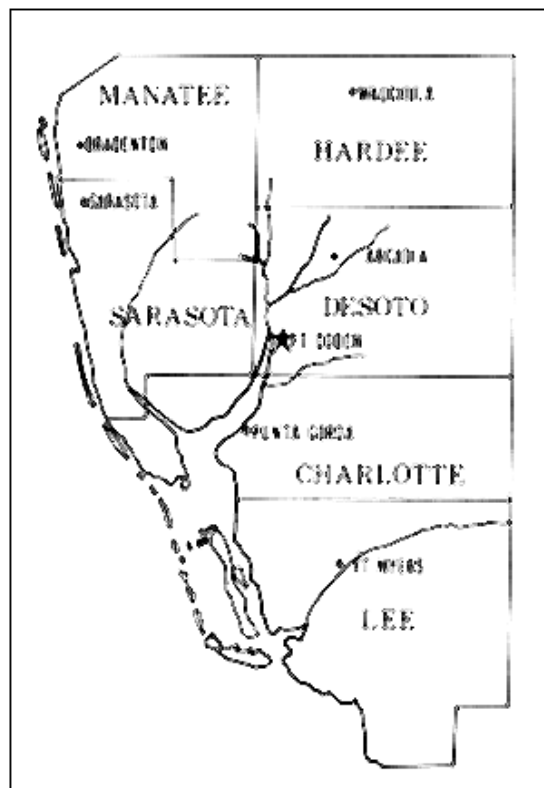


Illustration showing the location of Ft. Ogden and the surrounding area.

(map by David L. Lawrence)

De Soto County, Florida, March, 1912

John Daughtrey Junior planned and arranged for an overnight picnic to be held at Shell Creek, twelve miles from Fort Ogden, which is in Southern Florida. A general invite was extended to the inhabitants and visitors of Fort Ogden, out of which twenty-seven persons appeared on the other side of Shell Creek for Supper the night of March fifteenth nineteen hundred and twelve.

The advance guard rolled out of Fort Ogden at one thirty, headed by Sid Johnson and his wife, drawn by their old horse Charlie; following close behind came Mrs. J. D. Carr with her daughter Edla and Bertha Cowart. Bringing up the rear in a two seated spring wagon were Mrs. J. A. Duffy and family, Joe Buck and Mary Ida, with whom were George and Robert Russell.

John Daughtrey with a double wagon and two mules had a full load; Misses Fluella and Doris Dyess, & Oney Sloan, Eva Williams, and Messrs. Luther Gibson, Morris Daughtrey, Leon Williams and James O'Connor. These waited in town for school to close in order to pick up two more passengers, "The School Teachers" – the Misses Mattie Ivey and Eva Cole. School was out at two thirty and John started his mules Shell Creekwards soon after.

The advance guard had a good start, were loaded lighter and trotted some, arriving at the agreed upon camp about sunset.

Sid Johnson and Rob Russell delegated themselves to get some lightwood which had to be hauled by wagon nearly a half mile while the others unpacked the wagons and put up the tent.

Dr. Wallace Smoke, his wife and boy Stubby Herbert arrived in a spring wagon before Sid and Rob returned with the wood. After Dr. Smoke unhitched his horse he began to pour forth his tale of woe. It seems that he had left along the road two baked chickens, some biscuits, some coffee, some rice, some tin ware, in fact a little of everything he had in the wagon when he started. They had driven fast to catch up to the advance guard, and palmetto roots and gullies had done the rest. Tull Carr brought Rob and Ray Morgan in an auto.

The tent was up and Sid was boiling coffee when the first rain came. Everybody rushed for something, some found it, others didn't. Eventually the things that were perishable were secure in the tent. The rain continued to fall in torrents, the fire was nearly out, and the party had but one lantern. Rob Russell put on his oil skins, brightened up the fire, and put some more water on to boil, as the women wished to make chocolate.

Some anxiety was now expressed as to the whereabouts of the rear guard. The women of the party were afraid they were getting wet. Sid was sure John Tiger (nicknamed on account of size and strength, not ferociousness) had secured shelter at a little cabin not far from the road, while Dr. Smoke thought that in the storm and darkness they had gotten off the main road. He proceeded to lead them aright by firing many shots from his thirty eight revolver. They answered him and he continued to shoot when they answered.

At last John Tiger drove across the creek and landed the belated, wet, and bedraggled picnickers into camp. They were a happy bunch despite their appearances and although the rain had stopped, they still showed the signs of a passing shower.

The fire was piled high and soon blazing merrily, warming and semi-drying the late wet ones. One particular young lady got a friend of hers to take the creases out of her dress, the operation being performed thusly: the operator clutched the bottom of the skirt with both hands and yanked downward, while the particular one jumped upward. As the skirt wasn't torn apart, the creases probably were.



Picnickers around campfire in 1912. From left, back row, standing: Mrs. J. A. Duffy (with fancy hat); Jim O'Connor, Doris Dyess, Mattie Ivey, Mary Ida Duffy, Eva Cole, Leon Williams, Fluella Dyess, Luther Gibson, Herbert Smoke, Morris Daughtrey, Bertha Cowart, Oney Sloan, John Daughtrey and George Russell. From left, bottom row, sitting: Robert (Rob) Russell, Robert Morgan, Edla Carr, Joe "Buck" Duffy, Eva Williams, Curtis Johnson (wearing wide-brimmed hat in front center), Ray Morgan, Tully Carr, Mrs. J. O. Carr, Mary Johnson and Sid Johnson. Not shown is Dr. Wallace Smoke.

(photo courtesy of Curtis Johnson)

A large tarpaulin was spread on the ground and the women folkes [sic], including the "School Teachers" who had donned aprons that all but covered their heads, started to set things out for supper. Baskets, boxes and tin pails filled with everything good to eat appeared on all sides. Coffee was poured for those fortunate enough to have cups, and things began to happen, but not to anyone or anything except the eats.

The night had turned delightfully pleasant. The warm freshness of the air after the rain, and the glimpse one got of the stars between mouthfuls of ham, egg and lettuce sandwiches, deviled eggs, four kind [sic] of cake, cookies, and good coffee made one happy to be alive and joyful to be on such a picnic.

John Tiger dug a bunch of bananas out of his wagon, hung them on the ridge pole of the tent, and called out for all to help themselves which they "shore" did.

It didn't take long to clean up after supper and the dishes were placed in a pan to await the morning before being scoured. The few edibles that had been overlooked were returned to the basket, box, or pail, their fate only being postponed [sic] temporarily.

Rob Russell now wanted to take a flash light picture. The party arranged themselves near the fire and one was taken of the whole group with the exception of Dr. Smoke; but he was still sore about the loss of his chickens and probably thought it would show on his face.

After the picture, Tull Carr started for Ogden leaving the two Morgan boys in camp. He had perhaps been gone fifteen minutes when he returned with Dr. Smoke's chickens just as fine as when they were packed to bring, not injured a particle. Dr. Smoke drew a deep breath and began to enjoy himself.

Nine o'clock had passed before everybody was quietly seated (excepting some children) on the wagon seats around the fire or playing some favorite game. The most popular game seemed to be "truth." A number seat themselves in a circle, one placing his or her hand on a knee or the ground. The person to the left of the leader follows by placing a hand on top of the one already down and so on until all players have their hands in the pile. Now the person whose hand is at the bottom calls a number, for instance seventeen and pulling out his or her hand places it on top of all the other hands counting one. The hand now on the bottom is drawn forth, the owner placing it on top counting two. Thus continues until the seventeenth hand is placed on top, the owner being "it." Every one draws their hands away and in turn ask the unlucky one a question which must be answered truthfully.

John Tiger had two tents in his wagon; one, an immense affair fully large enough to hold everybody present, the other about the size as the one already up. These were both speedily stretched, and the bedding and other articles piled in.

One of the three tents was assigned to the women of the party and it soon had a number of occupants, all the chaperones having turned in after the younger folks claimed they were going to stay up all night.

Some continued to sit around the fire, others getting together in parties of four or five played all sorts of card games in the large tent, building a fire inside of it for light. The noise that grew from these games was not conducive to the slumber sought by those that had turned in.

A game of five handed poker was started, the stakes being cartridges. The noise of the other games died to insignificance amid the uproar that this game created. Roars of laughter rose from the group, interspersed with shouts and threats of violence if someone didn't stop stealing someone else's cartridges, all of course in the best spirit of fun.

John Tiger who was a participant in the poker game won everything in the cartridge line, and then said he was going out to cut some cabbage. He wanted to know who'd go with him and he had plenty of volunteers. Two axes were secured and John Tiger with his followers, of whom some were girls, started out to cut cabbage at half past twelve in the morning.

A few stayed behind, two especially to be noted, Fluella Dyess and Rob Russell who stayed in the big tent all alone playing stick frog.

The cabbage hunters returned in less than an hour proudly bearing the result of their toil: nine palmetto hearts or swamp cabbages as they are known in the South. Everything had been quiet while the cabbage party was away, but on their return they broke loose with revolvers and guns. Those without automatic noise makers shouted until everybody in camp was again awake, if they had ever succeeded in getting to sleep.

John Tiger got some ribs of beef and placed them on sticks before the fire to broil. When these were cooked everybody in sight was eating beef and raw cabbage.

After this repast had been disposed of, different games were resumed. John Tiger sang and danced "ain't she a pretty little shoe doll." A bunch got into the large double wagon back of the largest tent and sang, hollered and talked.

One young lady, Miss Cole, attempted to secure a moment's rest by laying down in the large tent; but her chum and fellow teacher couldn't see it, so she yanked her out, put her by the fire and made her sit up and take notice.

John Tiger was on hand to prevent any attempt at resting. Shooting a gun close by or shouting until the person answered were his usual methods, but he was ever ready to pull one out bodily if necessary.

Herbert Smoke, undoubtedly feeling the loss of sleep and the need of exercise, began to throw cabbage roots around. He was told to stop but paid no attention. Rob Russell called to his brother George and they picked Herbert up and carted him down to the creek, the intention being to throw him in. George either misunderstood or had pity on him, for when it was time to let go, George held on, and only the feet which Rob had hold of, got wet. But Herbert had his lesson and was good for the rest of the morning.

John Tiger got angry again about three thirty and said he was going to cook himself a mess of cabbage. After much searching two cabbages were found, all the others having been eaten raw. John Tiger made a selection of the people whom he wished to help him eat his cabbage, and began preparing to cook it. He had everybody convulsed with laughter making puns, witticisms & comments of the most harmless kind, while the pot boiled and the cabbage cooked. When the cabbage was pronounced cooked by Miss Ivey who had supervised the cooking of it, the selected few gathered around with plates that had just been washed clean by Eva Williams and Jimmie O'Connor. John Tiger dug out the portions and slapped them on the plates. Rob Russell wanted a flash picture of the cabbage eaters so they obligingly sat quiet while it was being taken and afterwards gave him some cabbage for taking it.

Daylight was seen before the cabbage was all eaten, sort of an early breakfast for the selected few.

The cry of daylight went around, followed by a grand finale of shots and shouts and so ended the sleepless night of the John Tiger band.

Having aroused everybody in camp, John Tiger and a couple of other fellows set off to cut some cabbage for dinner.

People began to find towels and soap and made excursions to the creek, hoping with the aid of the cold water to wash away the appearances of not having slept well.

Sid Johnson put a kettle of water on to boil, then sat down and rested. Every once in a while someone would pick up something and look at it as if they intended to start getting breakfast for the bunch; but they had that tired feeling and were soon to be seen crumpled up someplace watching others yawning, stretching and trying to look alive. After a few attempts of this character it was unanimously agreed that those who wanted any breakfast could take it out of the baskets for themselves.

John Tiger returned with half a dozen cabbages, all fine large ones. These were carefully put away to await the dinner cook's pleasure.

John Tiger and the other cabbage cutters cared not for breakfast. So a proposal was made that some fish be caught or shot for dinner. A large party set out for this purpose, armed with rifles, revolvers, and fishing lines. Accompanying the true hunters were several young ladies, unarmed for such an expedition save for their eyes which could be used in discovering fish at untold depths.

Rob Russell who at this time was busily washing up the "selected few" dishes was earnestly requested by the women who were to stay in camp, to discontinue the operation and go with the crowd, saying that they would finish washing them before supper time. Needless to say Rob left there in a hurry. Sid Johnson also remained in camp involving [sic] upon himself the responsibility of correctly cooking the six cabbages, a job of no mean proportions.

The time was announced as six thirty when the fishing party left camp, crossed the creek, and headed north going up stream. The cow path taken led through a thicket of scrub, oak, briers, vines and low trees, all right for scratching flies off a cow's back but making dodging a necessity and skirts a nuisance. This path was some fifty yards from the creek and ran parallel with it for a quarter of a mile. It then turned diagonally toward it, leading out to a high bank above the creek. The shore on either side at this point had little growth of any sort, which made walking again a pleasure.

In coming through the underbrush, those having lines had cut poles to which the lines were now tied, and fishing commenced. The marksmen with rifles and revolvers ready advanced cautiously along the banks peering into the different pools in hopes of discovering some unwary denizen of the shallow creek.

The creek was low, the depth of the water running from one to five feet. The height of the banks in some places was over ten feet above the water, at other places we could walk down a gradually sloping bank and easily jump safely across the water to the other bank.

It was not an ideal day for shooting fish. The wind was too high, ruffling the surface of the water, making it difficult to discover the fish and hard to judge the depth of the water. Depth is an important factor in shooting fish unless straight downward at them or at right angles; then one can aim straight at the fish. But at less acute angles one has to keep in mind the depth of the water, for water tends to force a bullet forward instead of downward and each additional foot of water increases this forward trend, making it necessary to point the gun eight inches to the side of a fish three feet under water, when you have a forty five degree shot.

Several fish were seen and shots tried but without success. The line fishermen caught a few small sun fish which were carried along for exhibition purposes, hardly being large enough to eat. These fishermen were using frogs for bait; these having been caught along the banks from time to time by those otherwise unemployed.

The party had continued up the creek in this way for nearly two miles, when it was decided to turn back. Before starting everyone sat down to rest. Rob Russell sat on a bank of the creek watching the kids of the party paddling and sporting in the water. Curtis Johnson, one of the paddlers, tired of this and thought it would be more fun to throw sand at Rob. He started in to do this but as Rob couldn't see the fun, he quickly told him to stop. Curtis paid no heed and was promptly picked up and heaved in the creek by Rob. Great was Rob's surprise when a large fish weighing all of twelve pounds was washed ashore by the big waves the force of Curtis's body falling from a height of four feet above the water had created. Rob at once jumped for the fish, receiving a good prod with one of the large fins, but throwing the fish far enough up the bank to make escape impossible. Curtis who had been standing in the water watching these proceedings, walked out looking like a wet rat and shouting loudly for all to come and see the fish he had caught.

The story was told to those who had not witnessed the catch and had they not been so near at hand and able to see the perfectly lively unmarked fish, would have undoubtedly thought it the best "fish story" ever.

Rob took a picture of Curtis and his fish after which Miss Cole tried a snap at the same subject.

Curtis and his paddling companions picked up the fish and at once started back to camp with it. John Tiger said it was a robalo but that everybody called them snooks.

Groups formed and everybody started back to camp, some going through the woods to avoid following the bends in the creek, others following straight along it in hopes of seeing something to shoot.

Curtis had arrived long before the main party and had recounted the wonderful and lucky capture of the twelve pound fish. Even the most staid of his listeners thought it rather remarkable.

The hour was still early, a few minutes before ten, but dinner preparations were well under way when the crowd returned, although dinner was not scheduled before twelve.

Some lay down to secure a little rest and a funny example was made of one young fellow who was unfortunate enough to fall asleep. When he awakened he was greeted with shouts of laughter. His face was ringed, dotted, and daubed with pot black, and he presented a most comical aspect.

Games started in different parts of camp and Rob Russell was well occupied for an hour skinning and cutting up the prize fish.

Mr. Morgan and Jeb Carr were guests at dinner, arriving from Fort Ogden in Mr. Morgan's auto about dinner time.

Everything edible was spread out on a large table cloth and dinner was ready. Before starting to eat everybody was requested to sit or stand quiet a second round the cloth and Rob Russell took another picture.

The dinner was excellent, the cabbage and coffee being especially fine. The fish was a little coarse but cooked well and not so bad. Dr. Smoke's now famous chickens were dissected and eaten with relish. There was plenty for all and everyone seemed to be doing the meal full justice.

Three bathers, Mrs. Johnson, Miss Ivey, and Miss Cole prepared for a plunge shortly after dinner. Upon their appearance in bathing costume nearly all the non-bathers followed them to the creek. Rob Russell took two pictures of them before they got wet and four others after they selected their bathing pool and were splashing around in it.

The spectators comfortably seated themselves around the pool while the mermaids dove, swam, and had a general good time.

As soon as the bathers had dressed everything was piled into the wagons, horses hitched, and a start made for Fort Ogden. Everybody seemed sorry to leave camp, most wishing to stay another night.

All still showed signs of tiredness but the largest demonstration given was by Mrs. Johnson, who curled herself on her side of the wagon seat, put her head in her husband's lap and tried to go to sleep. She stuck to the attempt for about a mile, but when an extra large palmetto root nearly bounced her out of the wagon, she decided she had best take her chances at stealing a wink sitting up.

Prairie Creek runs between Shell Creek and Fort Ogden and is eight miles from town. Shell Creek is five miles farther on and 13 miles from town. When Prairie Creek was reached on the return trip, John Tiger jumped out and began to unhook the mules, saying that the party was going to have supper here. Mrs. Carr who was somewhat ahead stopped when she discovered that the other wagons had halted, with the exception of Dr. Smoke's which was far in advance of her and beyond recall. When the plan for supper at Prairie Creek was explained to her, she turned the wagon around and unhitched as the others had done.

Leon Williams and John Tiger turned a skip rope while those who wished skipped. Some were extremely graceful, others – but what's the use. Sid Johnson was making the coffee, a few were down at the creek fishing or strolling around, some of the women folks were getting out the remains of the dinner.

It was only five o'clock when supper was ready. It was rather light but considering everybody had plenty at dinner no one was extra hungry and it did nicely.

Nothing much had been taken out of the wagons, so it did not take long after supper to return the few things, and the ride homeward was resumed.

About two miles from Prairie Creek, probably to prove to himself the constancy of his best lady friend, Leon Williams claimed to have lost a knife. John Tiger stopped the mules, for Leon said he was going back to hunt it. He asked his lady friend to help him; without a moment's hesitation she jumped out and they both started on the back trail. John Tiger was to wait until they returned. The two wagons that were blocked behind John Tiger when he stopped now pulled out in front and continued towards Ogden. Leon and his companion went back about twenty five yards, when they turned around and came back to the wagon, Leon apparently entirely satisfied and reconciled to the loss of his knife.

The mules were again urged forward, but were unable to catch the other wagons before they reached Ogden.

As the different persons were left at their respective homes one and all agreed that they would ever be ready to go on another Picnic just like it.