

CHAPTER XV

THE TRAIL, SIGNS AND SIGNALS.

THE difficult art of trailing or tracking is of great importance in Indian warfare.

While it is impossible for most white men to acquire this faculty, the constant exercise of the *bump of locality* through successive generations and the thorough investigation of every 'sign,' have rendered all savages sure guides over boundless prairies and through pathless forests.

A 'trail' is made up of various 'signs' or evidences that something has been present. All marks left on the ground, rocks, grass, trees or brush—the form, size, stride and directions of footprints and the firmness of impression, should be carefully noted. It should be made an invariable rule, when halting or camping, to make a reconnaissance of the ground in the neighborhood, with a view to ascertaining if any living thing is near or has lately passed.

The footprints of animals, their gait and direction, whether slowly walking (as in the act of feeding) or running (as when frightened), are all significant 'signs.'

Much valuable information may be obtained by carefully observing 'signs'; but to follow a trail successfully, one must not only possess a thorough understanding of all 'signs,' but also a knowledge of the character and habits of the thing trailed, the general features of the country round about, and the powers of the eye and ear must be cultivated to a great degree of acuteness.

The Indian well knows that the 'trail' is his principal weakness, and is never at a loss to resort to some ruse to complicate it, such as traveling over rocks and along the channels of streams, etc. He seldom thinks of danger ahead, but always keeps a proper rear guard in position, and strongly fortifies his camp toward the rear.

When closely pursued, a party of Indians will scatter and travel singly or in small detachments; and usually when the pursuers follow a single detachment, it will travel over the roughest and almost impracticable country, and make a detour of many miles.

When the 'trail' is leading toward some pass, *saddle* or low ridge or well defined landmark and suddenly becomes indistinct, it is generally safe not to expend time in hunting it; but to push rapidly on to the pass, etc., where the 'trail' will in all probability be found again. Before scattering, a point for concentrating is generally agreed upon.

When traveling over an unknown country, the Indian is guided by his nomadic instinct and the information received from those who have visited the section before. This fund of knowledge is very great. One of my Indian scouts (Chuck) in 1880, became quite noted for the accuracy with which he could designate suitable camps and various physical features of the country, relying *entirely* upon the information received from his father, who hunted in the same localities many years ago.

Traveling Indians usually set up mounds of stones to indicate the route and various other items of information, to those who may follow. In a timbered country, where the 'trail' is frequently covered with snow, the stones are placed in the forks and branches of the trees; or, the trees are *blazed* so that the notches face the traveler and at least two of them may be in sight at once.

The Indian seldom refers to the sun, moon or stars for his direction when traveling; but places his confidence in

whether or not it lies under any branches of the trees too low to permit the easy passage of a mounted man beneath them.

An Indian rider always mounts on and dismounts from the right side, and by noticing the places where the mounts and dismounts are made, it may be ascertained whether the rider is an Indian or a white man.

The moisture where the earth is removed and the droppings along the 'trail' are good indications of the age of the tracks. Where water has been crossed, the ground will, for some distance beyond, be wet, and show where drops of water have fallen from the animal's body or legs or where it has been splashed while in the act of crossing.

Tracks on snow may be followed with great rapidity, but it is frequently difficult to distinguish between those left by different animals.

The mode of shoeing, any defects in the hoofs or shoes, and whether shod all around, on the fore feet only, or not at all, should be carefully noted, as such items are sure to furnish valuable information at some time or another.

Much may be learned of the Indian's condition by carefully observing the nature of his 'trail' and camping places. Should abandoned property or comparatively valueless articles be left along the 'trail,' and should there be indications of disorder generally, it is evident that he has experienced demoralization.

To show to what skill a trailer may attain by constant and careful practice, I will briefly mention a few of the exploits of my chief of Umatilla scouts—Shaplish.

Being once in rapid pursuit of a few Indians who had murdered the owner of a ranch, on the south fork of the Salmon, in Idaho, and having followed them about forty miles, apparently gaining all the while, Shaplish suddenly informed me, "*No catch him—hiyu run—no sun!*", meaning that we were discovered, and that the Indians were travel-

'trail' was wide, and the deepest parts of the tracks were formed by the toes—all of which denoted the elasticity of youth, for which the man in question was much noted, in comparison with the commander of the other detachment.

Shaplish followed his selected 'trail' about ten miles, when his figuring proved correct.

Many other instances might be cited to show to what perfection the art of trailing may be carried.

By closely observing the movements and actions of animals a great deal of valuable information may be obtained. Should wild ducks be observed to *swim down stream* toward you, it is a sure sign that some form of man is approaching and has already been observed by the ducks.

If there be a mule with the party, it will be well worth the while to carefully watch his actions. If he stubbornly seeks a certain direction, with his head high and ears thrown forward, and seems much engaged, something is surely approaching; it may only be a bear or some smaller animal, but it will be well to be on the alert until the cause of the trouble is known.

All the Indians understand the *sign language*, consisting of some words of French and Spanish extraction, a few English words, such as '*how*' (how do) and '*by*' (good-bye), and a complete pantomimic vocabulary.

It is a custom with most Indians to run their ponies when approaching either friends or enemies, and unless their status is known they should be halted in due time. This is done by raising the right hand back, to the rear, and waving it forward and backward.

'*Who are you?*' is signalled by waving the right hand to the right and left several times in quick succession; '*We are friends,*' by raising both hands and grasping the left with the right, as in shaking hands; '*We are enemies,*' by closing the right hand and placing it against the forehead, or by waving a blanket (usually red) in the air. To say by signs '*that*

after a certain journey a good camp will be found, and that game may be found along the road,' first indicate the course of the sun, from its rising to the point at which it will appear on reaching the camp; then straddle one finger of the left hand with two fingers of the right, trotting them in imitation of the motions of pony and rider; then act as though halting, dismounting and firing; then remount and proceed on the way; finally stop, bow the head, rest it on the hand and close the eyes in imitation of sleep.

To intimate that '*such a one is dead,*' place one hand over the other and then quickly slip it beneath (gone under); that '*such ones are husband and wife,*' point to each and place the forefingers in contact throughout (meaning one); that '*such ones are brothers and sisters,*' point to each and place two fingers in the mouth (meaning nourished at the same breast); that '*such ones are good friends,*' point them out and fold the arms over the breast, etc.

The various tribes are indicated by making the representation of some totem peculiar to each.

The Comanches, or 'Snakes,' by a gliding motion, like a crawling snake.

The Crows, by imitating the flapping of wings

The Sioux, or 'Cut-throats,' by drawing the hand across the throat.

The Kiowas, or 'Prairie Men,' by imitating the drinking of water.

The Pawnees, or 'Wolves,' by placing the hands at the sides of the head, like the ears of a wolf.

The Arapahoes, or 'Smellers,' by laying hold of the nose.

The Utes, or 'Dwellers Among the Mountain Tops,' by pointing upward.

The Cheyennes, or 'Cut Arms,' by drawing the hand across the arm, etc.

The Indians have a system of signaling by means of smokes during the day, and fires at night. The color

(light or heavy), the volume (thin or dense), and the varying brilliancy of flame, are all significant signals. Every tribe jealously guards the secrets of its code of signals.

Smokes may be raised several hundred feet in a vertical column by making a fire without much blaze and piling on green boughs, grass and weeds. By confining the smoke and permitting it to escape at intervals, puffs may be sent up at will.

Owing to the very clear mountain air, the elevated 'buttes' and mountain ridges may be seen at a great distance, and may serve the purpose of signal stations.

The Indian alphabet is very similar to ours, being made up of long and short lines. By spreading a blanket over the column of smoke and quickly displacing it, the length or shortness of the columns, as well as their frequency, may be regulated.

This system of telegraphing, so successfully pursued by the Indians when separated and preparing for a flight or defense, might be used to good advantage by co-operating columns of troops, the commanding officers having previously fixed upon some simple system of signals, such as the combination of the numbers of smokes and the intervals (in time) between them.

