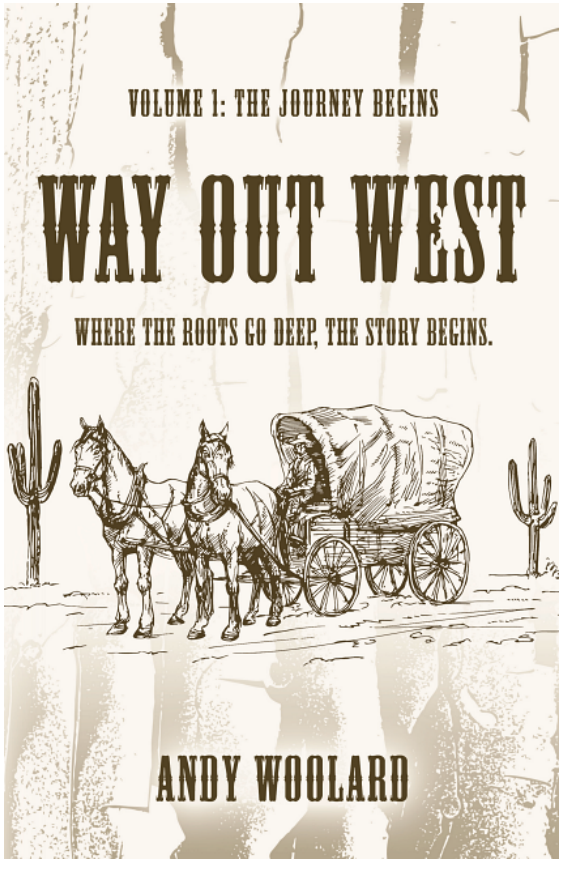

"Way Out West" follows the Whitlock family's 1872 journey from Brooklyn to the mysterious American frontier. Seeking new beginnings, they uncover ancient secrets, face hardships, and discover destiny awaits beyond the known path.

Way Out West - Volume 1: The Journey Begins

By Andy Woolard

VOLUME 1: THE JOURNEY BEGINS

WAY OUT WEST

WHERE THE ROOTS GO DEEP, THE STORY BEGINS.

ANDY WOOLARD

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Chapter One:
A Man Wears Down

The alley behind Gallagher's butcher shop smelled of blood, smoke, and wet coal. Not the kind of smoke that came from a hearth, but the gritty, industrial kind that clung to your skin and stung your eyes. John Whitlock adjusted the weight of the wooden crate on his shoulder, his breath turning to mist in the cold February air. The wind had a way of cutting through even the thickest wool, and this morning, it seemed especially mean.

He didn't stop to complain. He never did.

The soles of his boots slipped a little as he crossed the frost-glazed stones, stepping around a broken barrel that had leaked something thick and sticky in the night. A cat—dead or asleep, he couldn't tell—was curled beneath a bent stairwell. Trash clung to the base of the walls like ivy. The city had a way of swallowing men whole, and on mornings like this, John felt half-digested.

He'd worked at Gallagher's for eleven years. Ten if you didn't count the first winter, when he was little more than a boy sweeping sawdust and mopping up blood for a quarter a day. Now he was thirty-three, strong as an ox, and tired in ways he couldn't explain to anyone—not even Clara. The days wore on him. The routine wore deeper. His hands, once soft and skilled, were now rough and scarred, mapped with cuts and burns and cold-cracked knuckles.

"Whitlock!" barked a voice from inside the shop.

John stepped through the back door just as a blast of heat from the ovens slammed into him like a wall. The scent inside was no better—meat, salt, brine, and grease. Gallagher was leaning over the chopping block, a bloodied apron wrapped around his girth like a second skin. "Where the hell you been?"

"Haulin' ribs from the storeroom," John answered, setting the crate down with a solid thump.

Gallagher grunted and tossed a cleaver down. It sank deep into a slab of shoulder roast. "We're behind already. Tell Lem to stop chattin' with the damn delivery boys and help scrape bone."

John nodded and turned, pushing past a younger man who looked half-frozen despite the ovens blazing in the back. He remembered being that young, once. Eager. Hungry. Full of ideas and hopes.

That didn't last long in Brooklyn.

The morning passed in a blur of cold steel and dull ache. Knives rang off bone. Meat thudded to the block. Gallons of blood ran through the gutters behind the shop, pooling in grates and freezing in clumps. By noon, John's shoulders burned. His fingers were so stiff he had to flex them just to hold the handle of his cleaver. The younger boys joked and cursed and spit tobacco near the ovens, but John kept quiet.

He always did.

By the time the bell above the front door jingled for the last time, the sun had already begun its slow crawl down between the chimneys. John wiped his hands on a rag blackened by grease and marrow, tossed it into the bin, and shrugged on his coat. He didn't speak on his way out. Gallagher didn't say goodbye.

He stepped back into the winter afternoon, shoulders hunched. The streets were still busy—carts rolling by, horses steaming in the cold,

boys hawking papers on corners. The city never slept, but it didn't care either. It moved around you, with or without your permission. And for the men like John, it never moved in your favor.

He passed Mrs. Dailey hanging laundry between fire escapes, steam puffing from her mouth as she scolded her son. He passed three dockworkers playing dice in the alley, and a preacher shouting about damnation from a milk crate on the corner. All of it blurred into noise.

At the base of the steps to his building, he stopped. The bricks were crumbling again near the stoop. He made a mental note to patch them, though he knew he wouldn't. By the time he got home, ate supper, checked on the kids, and got up at dawn to do it all again… he wouldn't have the strength.

Fourth floor. Always the fourth floor.

He opened the door slowly, the hinge creaking, and the smell of bread greeted him like a gentle slap. Warm, faintly sweet. Clara had been baking again.

Inside the apartment, things were as they always were. Dim, narrow, and packed tight. A cot against one wall. A table with three chairs. A small stove and chipped washbasin. The window rattled slightly from the wind. The curtains were sewn from an old quilt Clara's mother had left behind before she passed.

Clara was at the stove, hair pinned back, sleeves rolled to the elbow. She glanced over her shoulder and smiled tiredly.

"You're home late."

"Gallagher had me lugging sides of beef before sunup," John replied, shrugging off his coat. "And Lem sliced his hand again. I finished his shift."

Clara didn't say anything for a moment. She turned back to the bread, then said softly, "There's stew."

Charlie ran in first—eight and always full of questions. He carried a wooden toy wagon John had carved for him last winter. "Papa! Matthew made me be the ox today, but I wanted to drive!"

Behind him came Ellie, hair braided tight, with a pencil in one hand and a sheet of folded paper in the other. "I drew the bakery. Look, Papa. With smoke from the chimney and Mr. Brill holding the bread in tongs."

John crouched to examine it. "That's real good, El. Captured Brill's frown just right."

She beamed.

Matthew came last. Twelve now, and serious. He nodded at his father. "We read about the new railroad heading west. There's a map in the paper."

John paused.

"You thinking about it again?" Clara asked, still stirring the stew.

He didn't answer.

Not yet.

After dinner, the children were ushered to bed. Ellie begged for another story, but Clara promised two tomorrow if she settled quickly. The walls between rooms were little more than worn curtains strung on wires, so John could still hear the rustling of blankets, the soft sound of whispers and giggles from Charlie and Matthew, and Ellie murmuring to herself as she imagined whatever came after the bedtime tales.

John sat at the table, staring at the last of his stew. It had gone cold, but he hadn't touched it in nearly fifteen minutes.

Clara joined him, drying her hands on a linen. She didn't sit yet. Just looked at him with that expression that held both care and calculation. She'd always been able to read him, even when he didn't know what he was thinking himself.

"You haven't said much," she finally offered.

John leaned back, arms crossed, eyes distant. "I heard something today. From the newsboy."

Clara tilted her head slightly.

"Land grants. West of the Mississippi. Homestead Act's still going. They're saying the new lines'll reach Kansas by summer. Maybe further."

He waited. Let the weight of the words settle.

Clara took the empty bowls, rinsed them in the tin basin, and set them aside.

Then, calmly: "And you believe them?"

John shrugged. "Don't know. But I believe this…" He gestured toward the window. "This ain't gonna change. The boys'll end up hauling ice or breaking coal same as me. Ellie's got gifts—drawing, numbers—but where's she going to use those? Here? She'll marry some chimney sweep's son before she's sixteen."

He paused.

"I want more for them."

Clara nodded slowly, lips pressed into a tight line. “And for you?”

John looked her in the eye. “Yeah. Me too.”

There was a long silence. The kind of silence that only came between two people who’d known each other for half a life. Then Clara reached for the folded paper in her apron pocket. She opened it and smoothed it on the table. It was the very same flier from the newsboy.

“I picked this up after market,” she said. “Been sitting with it all day.”

John blinked. “You too?”

She finally sat. “I didn’t marry a fool, John. I married a man who works himself near to death and comes home with nothing left. I’ve watched you grind yourself down for a city that won’t ever love you back.”

Then, more gently, “And I’ve watched the children shrink. Not in size, but in spirit. They’re already learning the rules of this place. Keep your head down. Don’t expect too much. Hope quietly, if at all.”

She tapped the flier. “Maybe there’s risk out there. But there’s nothing but certainty here. And I don’t like what it’s certain about.”

John stared at her, heart heavier than his work crates had ever been. “You’d go? Leave everything?”

Clara smiled faintly. “There’s not as much to leave as you think.”

They stayed up long past when the fire should’ve gone out.

John poured over the map on the back of the advertisement while Clara fetched the tin of savings from beneath a loose board in the floor. It wasn’t much—just under sixty-three dollars. Enough for train fare west, maybe a few tools, but not enough to start clean.

"We'd need to sell the table, the iron skillet, your work boots," Clara said, voice even. "Maybe the baker will take the loom and give me a little more for the jars."

John shook his head. "You need to keep the loom."

"For what, John? So I can stitch lace for women who already think I smell like firewood and animal fat?"

They both laughed quietly—exhausted, fragile laughter.

John looked back down at the map. "There's a line that runs through Ohio, connects through St. Louis. Beyond that…" He dragged his finger westward. "Kansas. Nebraska. Even Wyoming territory."

"They say some towns are giving land to any man who'll put up a house and plant corn."

"That's the dream, isn't it?" he muttered. "Plant something and actually get to watch it grow."

The conversation tapered off after that, not because it had ended but because it had settled into something quieter. A seed planted in shared silence. Something real. Something stubborn.

By midnight, the lamp burned low, and John found himself standing at the window, staring out over rooftops stained with smoke and soot. Somewhere below, a drunk was cursing at a lamppost. Farther off, a whistle blew—probably a police wagon.

He didn't belong here anymore. Maybe he never had.

Behind him, Clara slid her arms around his waist. He leaned into her without a word.

“We don’t have to decide tonight,” she whispered.

“No,” he said. “But I think we already have.”

Chapter Two:
Smoke and Leaving Things Behind

The sky over Brooklyn was gray with ash the morning John Whitlock quit Gallagher's butcher shop.

Not smoke from a fire—just the usual soot that drifted down from chimney stacks, blanketing windowsills and clogging gutters. A haze you learned to live with, same as the noise, same as the hard looks from men who'd lost too much to afford kindness.

John had planned to give notice. He really had. But Gallagher had a way of turning decency into something sour.

"You leaving me short-staffed?" the butcher grunted, slamming a cleaver down into a thick roast. "After all I done for you? Don't be an ungrateful bastard, Whitlock."

John stood still, arms folded, coat still buttoned.

"You paid me. I worked. That was the deal," he said. "I'm not asking for a parade. Just letting you know."

Gallagher looked him up and down, eyes narrowing. "Men like you don't belong on no homestead. You'll be back by winter, broke and skinny."

"Maybe," John replied. "But I'll go broke chasing something I chose. That's more than you can say."

He left before Gallagher could respond, boots echoing on the blood-slick stone floor. He didn't take the cleaver Gallagher gave him five Christmases ago. He didn't take anything.

Outside, the morning was brightening, though the sun never quite broke through. The city wore its usual scowl.

John didn't care. For the first time in years, he was walking away from something that had kept him hunched and small. And ahead—out west—there was sky. That's what he kept telling himself.

Sky.

The next days passed in a blur of lists and farewells.

Clara had taken charge, as John knew she would. Her quiet efficiency rivaled any general's. Every drawer was sorted. Every item was measured for value, weight, and usefulness. The tin kettle? Keep. Too dented to sell, too reliable to leave behind. John's second pair of boots? Sell. The soles were worn anyway. Her mother's braided rug? Folded gently, kissed once, and packed.

The children sensed it too, even if they didn't understand it. Matthew grew unusually quiet. Charlie asked a dozen questions an hour—about trains, about buffalo, about whether God lived farther west than New York. Ellie began sketching wagons and horses on every scrap of paper she could find.

One night, as John folded shirts into a trunk, Matthew sat beside him on the floor.

"Are we going to a place where you won't be tired all the time?"

John paused, sock in hand.

"I'll still be tired," he said. "But it'll be for our own land. For something that belongs to us. That kind of tired feels better."

Matthew considered that for a long while before nodding.

The next morning, Clara walked to the bakery and returned with their savings nearly doubled. She'd sold her loom, her winter coat, and two bundles of dried herbs she used for baking.

John opened his mouth to protest, but she shut it with a look.

"This isn't about what we're losing," she said. "It's about what we're willing to give."

The Whitlocks spent one final Saturday in their building, cleaning and patching what they could. Clara insisted on it.

"We leave this place better than we found it," she said.

Ellie wrote notes to their neighbors on scraps of linen: *Thank you for the stories. Thank you for the sweets.* She folded each one carefully and slipped them under doors with Charlie trailing behind like a pageboy.

John visited Mr. Dwyer, the shoemaker below, and gave him a pipe he hadn't smoked in years.

"West, you say?" Dwyer asked, puffing on his own. "You're a braver man than me."

"Not brave," John said. "Just done waiting."

That night, the family ate by candlelight—cold beans and bread, their last homemade supper in the city. They didn't speak much. The room seemed smaller than ever. As if the walls already knew they were being left behind.

When the candle burned low, Clara whispered a prayer none of them had heard before. Something from her grandmother's tongue. John didn't ask what it meant.

Some things you just carry with you.

The train station was louder than John expected. Filthy, too. A churning mass of people, steam, soot, and urgency. Children clutched toys; mothers clutched children. Barkers shouted. Porters wheeled trunks through puddles of slush and horse droppings. Somewhere, a woman wept into her gloves. Somewhere else, a group of men laughed too hard about something no one else found funny.

The Whitlocks stood as close together as five people could.

Clara held Ellie's hand, her thumb running in small circles over her daughter's knuckles. Charlie clung to the hem of his father's coat, eyes wide with wonder. Matthew carried his own bag with square-shouldered seriousness. He was determined not to be treated like a boy anymore.

John kept checking their tickets. He didn't know why. Maybe it helped ground him. Maybe it just kept his hands busy.

"Track seven!" the conductor called, and suddenly the crowd shifted.

They moved in waves, pushed forward by urgency and the need to not be left behind. John led, the others close behind. Their bags weren't many—a trunk, two satchels, Clara's bundle wrapped in oilcloth—but they were enough to feel heavy.

The train was a hulking iron monster, blackened from hundreds of trips and bearing the scars of soot and weather. It hissed and groaned and trembled like a living thing.

As they reached the car marked for westbound settlers, Clara turned back for just a moment.

Brooklyn was gray behind them. Ugly and smudged and full of memories. The kind you couldn't quite scrub clean. She let her eyes linger—on the brickwork, on the roofs, on the sky that had always been too low.

Then she stepped up into the train and didn't look back again.

The train lurched forward. Ellie squealed, then apologized. Matthew muttered something about speed. Charlie stuck his nose to the window and tried to count how many houses they passed.

John sat stiffly, back straight, knees clenched. He didn't speak for nearly half an hour.

Clara touched his arm. "Regretting it already?"

"No," he said. Then, after a pause, "I just don't know if we're chasing something real… or just running from what we know."

Clara gave a soft smile. "Maybe both. Maybe that's how it always starts."

He looked at her. Her calmness. Her strength. The way she held Charlie's hand while correcting Ellie's grammar without missing a beat.

He didn't deserve her. But he'd spend the rest of his life trying to.

The train picked up speed, and the buildings began to thin.

Fields. Open yards. Patches of woodland.

Then sky.

The real kind.

Wide and unfiltered and full of promise.

For the first time in years, John let out a breath that didn't feel burdened.

They were on their way.

Chapter Three:
Iron Roads and Stranger Faces

The first day on the train was novelty.

By the second, it was endurance.

And by the third, it was something else entirely—something like resignation, with a dash of quiet panic underneath.

The seats were hard, the air dry. Soot leaked in through unseen cracks and clung to your throat. The children grew tired of games. Even Charlie, who had spent the first hours delighting in every cow, creek, and station they passed, now stared out the window with glassy eyes.

John sat by the window, arms folded, coat rolled behind his neck for support. He'd always thought trains were fast. And they were, in bursts. But out here, between towns, the engine slowed, sometimes to a crawl. There were long stretches of silence—just wind, trees, and the dull thump of steel against steel.

They shared their car with a family from Pennsylvania—a freckled father with a wheezing laugh, his wife with a floral bonnet, and three children who looked like they'd never seen a city in their lives. There was also a widow, tight-lipped and dressed in gray, who read a Bible with the kind of intensity that discouraged conversation.

Matthew had taken it upon himself to "record things," as he called it. Clara had given him a small journal, and every evening he scrawled notes in it by the light of the oil lamp mounted to the cabin wall.

“March 14. Ate bread and jerky. Saw seven deer. Papa said we’ll be in Ohio by morning.”

“March 15. Rain. Everything smells like coal.”

John read it over his shoulder once. He didn’t say anything, but it made something pinch in his chest.

The train whistled as it crossed into Ohio, the air outside thick with early spring damp. John spotted barns, then fences, then whole plots of land that stretched wide and open—far more space than Brooklyn ever offered. It stirred something in him. Not joy, not yet. But possibility.

In one small town, the train stopped longer than expected. The conductor announced a delay with little explanation, and the passengers were allowed to disembark for fresh air. Clara stretched her legs while Ellie clutched her sketchbook and wandered a few feet off to draw the depot building.

John walked the platform slowly, his boots heavy on the old timbers. At the far end of the platform, a group of older men stood under the eaves of a warehouse, smoking and talking in low tones.

One of them, tall and rail-thin with a tobacco-stained mustache, noticed him.

“East-coaster?” the man asked.

John gave a half-smile. “Brooklyn.”

The man chuckled. “You’ll miss the sewer rats and smoke soon enough.”

“Maybe,” John said. “Or maybe not.”

The man nodded and offered a pipe, which John politely declined. "Where you headed?"

"As far west as the rail'll carry us. Then wherever the land takes us."

The man gave a thoughtful grunt. "Land'll test you. Break you, if you're not ready."

"I ain't been ready for most of what life's thrown at me," John replied. "Still standing."

The man tipped his hat. "Well then. Maybe you'll do."

By the time the train screeched back to life, John had a fresh layer of soot on his coat and a small sense of something strange: confidence. Not in the trip, or the land, or the journey. But in himself.

They were going somewhere hard. But maybe he was hard enough now to meet it.

That night, the wind picked up.

The train clattered along through Indiana, where the fields rolled and stretched like waves of frozen sea. Trees stood skeletal in the moonlight, stark against the sky. John barely slept, kept awake by the sway of the car and the occasional rattle of the couplings.

Charlie snored lightly against Clara's lap. Ellie was curled up in a blanket, pencil still clutched in her hand. Matthew had wedged himself into the corner of the seat, journal tucked beneath his arm like a prized possession.

John stared out the window at the vastness.

"Do you think we'll be happy?" Clara asked quietly beside him.

He didn't answer right away.

"I think we'll be different," he said.

Clara nodded, not looking at him. "That's something."

Later, he rose and stepped into the narrow corridor between cars. The door groaned on its hinges as he pushed it open and stepped onto the small iron plate that joined the cars. Wind tore at his coat, and the deafening rush of wheels and air swallowed every thought.

He looked back.

The line of cars stretched behind him, swaying like a snake over the endless track. There was no smoke from factories, no voices from alleyways. Just stars. Thousands of them. Clear and sharp and impossibly still.

He'd never seen so many.

A man could get used to this, he thought. Or maybe not. Maybe a man didn't need to get used to it. Maybe it was enough to just finally see it.

He stayed there a long while—until the cold bit into his ears and his nose began to run.

When he returned, Clara was asleep with Charlie still tucked close. Ellie stirred but didn't wake. Matthew, eyes barely open, whispered, "How far now?"

John draped a blanket over him. "Farther than yesterday. Not as far as tomorrow."

By the fifth day, they reached Missouri.

The train crawled into the station at St. Louis, screeching and huffing like a beast out of breath. The Whitlocks, stiff from travel, disembarked into a different world. No longer the smog-stained streets of the East, and not yet the raw wilderness of the West—St. Louis was something in between. It bustled with the promise of new beginnings and the grime of too many half-finished dreams.

Men shouted over crates of cargo. Steam rolled from beneath the platforms. Horses neighed, wagons clattered, and travelers spilled into the square like loose gravel. Soldiers moved among the crowd in gray coats, and here and there, John caught the glint of polished rifles. There was tension under the surface. That much was clear.

Clara kept the children close. Matthew held onto Charlie's hand, guiding him around crates and hurried porters. Ellie's eyes were wide as she took in every storefront, every color, every sound.

"Stay sharp," John muttered, glancing side to side. "We don't know this place."

They had an overnight layover before transferring to a westbound train—the last one headed into Kansas for the next three days. It was both blessing and inconvenience. Clara saw opportunity. John saw exposure.

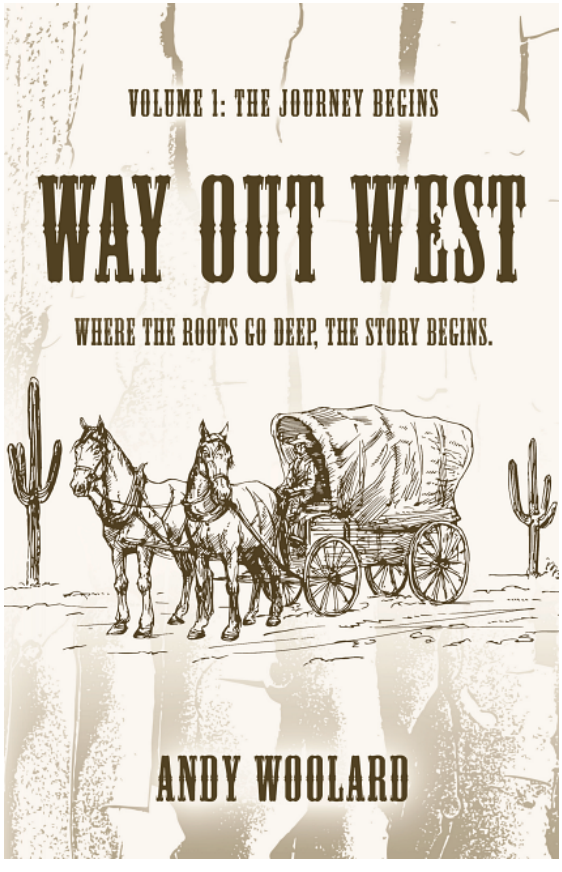
Still, they found a room in a boarding house near the station. The keeper was a stout woman named Hattie with a voice like gravel and a heart two sizes bigger than it needed to be.

"I like yer wife," she told John, leaning over the desk with a conspiratorial wink. "Smart. Doesn't say much. The quiet ones always notice the most."

John chuckled softly. "That's true enough."

Their room was small but clean. It smelled faintly of lemon oil and pipe smoke. Clara set to wiping things down anyway—habit, not mistrust—and John took the boys to fetch bread and dried fruit from a market stand two blocks down.

That night, for the first time in nearly a week, they slept in beds that didn’t move.



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