

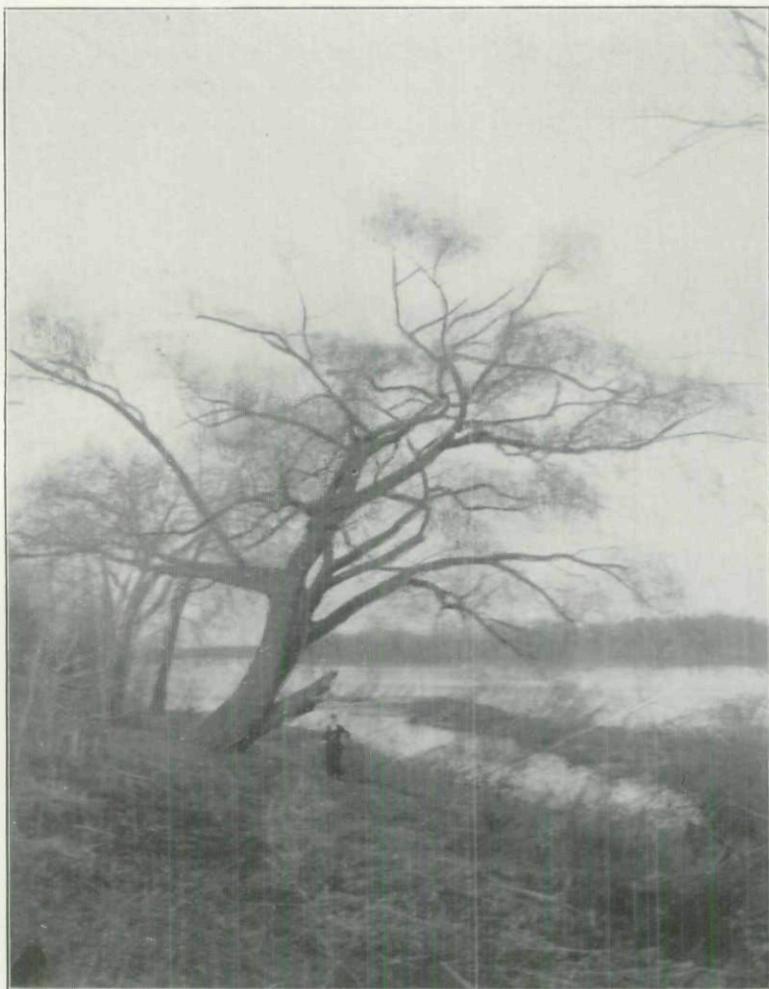
FRONTIER CHURCH GOING—1837.

BY GEORGE C. DUFFIELD.

James Duffield's family was strictly Presbyterian. Husband and wife were born, reared and married in Pennsylvania, in the thick of that religious excitement which carried away the country under the leadership of Lorenzo Dow and Peter Cartwright. The wonderful things accomplished by these men, and the remarkable experiences of their converts, some of whom were the neighbors of the Duffields, were the usual subjects of the conversation I first remember. Father was by training and temperament rather indifferent, until a time later than that of which I speak, 1837 to 1842. Such, however, was the family conviction that each felt less fear of wild beast or savage than he might encounter somewhere in the woods, than of a personal devil or a real lake of fire. So, scarcely had the family become fixed in its new cabin home, when it sought public spiritual intercourse. The settling of five or six families on the west side of the Des Moines river in 1837, supplied the numbers, and the common enthusiasm aided the religious spirit from which came an earnest concentrated movement toward an assemblage for public worship. The essential elements lacking were a minister, and a building. A friend visiting Samuel Clayton, Hill by name, supplied the first of these wants, and as

The groves were God's first temples,

so in our neighborhood, in August, 1837, upon the right bank of the Des Moines river at the point touched first by the settlers, a few hundred yards above the mouth of Chequest creek, there was selected our "first temple", since known as "The old church tree." Since the land came into my possession from the Des Moines river improvement company, I have carefully preserved this tree as did Samuel Clayton who owned it first.



THE OLD CHURCH TREE.

This ancient elm still stands on the farm of George C. Duffield, of Van Buren county. Under its spreading branches was held, in August, 1837, the first religious services in Iowa Territory, west of the Des Moines river. The majestic stream of those days is seen in the background.

And so, "It was given out" that there "would be meetin' at the comin' out of the ford Sabbath day next," and our family's preparation for and attendance at this meeting may be of interest.

Sunday was literally a day of rest. Provision against labor both within and without the cabin was always carefully made. The work of rail-making, chopping, deadening, grubbing, brush and log-heaping, persistently engaged in by father, two grown sons and two "chunks of boys," from morning till night even in August, was suspended Saturday morning. Father, taking old Ketch, the flint lock rifle, and the hunting knife, disappears into the woods. Mother has likely begun the clipping of boys' hair, with no less than five or six of them for her task. Fire wood, never supplied far in advance, is now provided for the extra occasion by some of the boys. Presently, at a distance the sharp crack of a rifle. Then a pow wow, as to whether it was father's. The dispute ends by referring the question to mother, who withholds her judgment knowing that another shot will afford a better chance to determine. Soon it came. Then another wrangle and wild gestures by way of expressing our belief that this last shot sounded like the first and that its direction was toward "the little bottom," or the "Cedar bluff." This clamor ends with another report and, mother having given us all the good that can come of such discussion, ends the controversy by saying definitely, not only whether it was father's rifle, but if not to whom it belonged. It is a remarkable truth that our rural citizens today no more clearly distinguish the tones of their own farm bells, or our city friends the peals from their own church steeples, than did the families of the settlers the reports of their several rifles. The different reports this morning tell that more than one family in the country is getting ready for Sunday, and when father came in, about noon, he had only done that which may have been done by each neighbor. Skill at that time was in the shooting rather than in the

finding of game, which was plenty. Within four or five miles and within a few hours, he had provided abundantly, bringing either a pheasant or a wild turkey. Hanging them on their proper pins on the north side of the cabin and the gun on the antlers over the mantel, he came out of doors and sat down to await his turn under the shears. He directs Jim and me to mount "old Jule" and go into the woods for the rest of the game. The skill developed by settlers in directing each other, and in following directions, through the pathless and unblazed woods now seems to me remarkable. Accustomed to the natural appearance of the woods, however, the settler's eye instantly detected anything out of the ordinary. A sharp sense of distance and direction was developed. So, on account of the hot weather, and these traits found even in the boys, father was more specific in urging haste than in describing our objective point. "Be peart, now," he would say. "Go up the creek bed from the big rock to the white clay bluff, up the ridge, around the hollow to the right, and between the dead elm pole in the opening north and the hanging jack oak limb I broke west of it; the deer is in the May apples." With the "big rock" as the only known mark, the rest was explicit, except as to distance, and this didn't matter. Two boys, a blind mare and a hound. Could they go into the woods from three to five miles and find a deer that had been hidden from wolf and Indian? Were they only to follow the general course, they could tell when within a few yards by the peculiar motion of old Jule's ears and nostrils. The exact spot was always pointed out by old Ketch stopping in his wide range through the woods to make a short circle and sniff among the May apples. He had helped to hide, and now he helped to find the deer. As the horns were "in the velvet" at this time of the year, father would skin out the head and leave it on the ground. The odor did not induce the greatest composure on old Jule's part, and if otherwise inclined to be quiet, the deer's hoofs gouged into her flanks by the boys

trying to lift it to her withers, would set her dancing. So by the time we had the deer and ourselves ready to ride back, the blue gray coat of the deer, the old mare's back and sides, and the clothing of the boys were all covered with gore. In winter the deer would have been hung up out of doors and removed piece by piece from the skin as needed by the family. But in August a different course must be pursued. So this Saturday, the heart and liver, likely, served respectively as supper and breakfast next morning. The rest of the carcass, cleaned and quartered, was hung on the shady side of the cabin. The fat from the entrails and other portions was carefully dressed out, and put into the big kettle out of doors. As quickly as convenient after father returned from the woods, boys were sent to the nearest neighbors to see whether any of the venison were needed. In almost incredible time these neighbors, if they wished the meat, appeared upon the scene, and took away their choice. If any boy messenger came this way to our house, it was the almost involuntary thought that his father had venison that would be wasted if we did not help use it. In such case old Jule was brought into use quickly, and the trail to the neighbor's taken forthwith. On arrival, each was given his selection from the proper number of cuts, the settler who provided it generously refusing to appropriate any part until all but his had been removed. And so father always returned this common favor; the time and task of procuring the game were compensated by his retaining the skin and the tallow, these often being more necessary than the flesh itself. If the venison was not all needed, then came the labor of curing the portions remaining. Long, thin, slender strips were cut, though the width did not matter much. There was a wooden beam across the top of the fire-place, supporting the front of the chimney in place of an arch. Large nails were driven into this from the inner side, so that the heads protruded several inches into the draft. On these nails, or on slender sticks suspend-

ed by strips of bark from the end nails in the beam described, would be hung these strips of venison. I have seen the upper two-thirds of that old fire-place draped with the fringe of flesh. On the hearth, much farther out than even the fore-stick usually lay, would be piled green hickory chips and chunks, and the heavy sluggish film of smoke slowly rose among the red strips, now drawing into and up the chimney, then weaving outward into the room and obscuring them, but always keeping off the flies. This, I supposed, was the only purpose of the process, for when the fire became low, the first thing we boys would hear about it would be from mother. "Boys, take care—the flies." Which meant that we must bestir ourselves for fuel. An awkward move might knock a piece or the whole row of pieces into the ashes; too much fire might scorch it. It made little difference. At the end of the process it was "jerk," and no jerk was bad. It was a universal necessity. Being proof against dirt, insect and water, it was the hunter's lunch; being right at hand where he had either to take it down or spit tobacco on it, it was refreshment for many a frontier beau; many a restless child during long sermons, was bribed with it into quiet, and babes cut their teeth upon it. Inside and out of the cabin, all has been a bustle. Some firing the tallow kettle, others dressing game, some doing one thing, some another, but not an idle minute for a single hand. The last of the special Saturday tasks was to clean the kettle and scrub the floor. The tallow rendered out, the kettle was partly filled with water, and a shovel of ashes put in. Boiling it, there was little more to do than to empty it to have the kettle clean. Then it was filled, the water heated, and with some more ashes and a hand shaved hickory broom the cabin floor underwent a dressing worthy of the name. Fragments and particles there often were, of bark, rotten wood, lint, worm casts and leaf mold in a settler's cabin, even in or on his food; but dirt never. It was annihilated Saturday afternoons. So was the use of stools or chairs for

any luckless barefoot boy who dared to "track up" that floor. While the women and children have been otherwise engaged, father has placed the fragment of a mirror as a chink between the logs out doors and with a great broad bladed razor, lather from home made soap and with a home made brush, proceeds to shave. This brush was his own handiwork. Hogs of that day supplied immense bristles. Selecting a handful of the best, their soft ends would be laid even, and with the fresh sinew of a deer, they would be wound and bound together from about two inches, back toward the butts. When done there was a good big sheaf of them made into a complete brush, with handle, and of great endurance. Stropps were seldom other than of crude home made leather, and not fit to bring the razor to "an aidge." How many times this was only done by bringing the family bible into use. How many frontier bibles may be misread in days to come; their worn backs translated "piety" instead of "poverty." The evening closed over the settlement, with every hearth made ready for the first true Sabbath, the advent of church going on the frontier.

Breakfast at the same early hour, on cold corn pone instead of fritters usually, and deer liver broiled on the coals. A toilet completed on a scale never before attempted. That is, every one in the family was washed, combed, and dressed at the same time. This may be better understood when I say, first, that on this grand occasion not one wore buck skin, while never on week days, did less than three or four wear it. And I can add, too, to make the toilet better understood, that at or about this time the youngest three or four of us were habitually sent into the woods on the approach of strangers, because of the lack of garments on our forms. For months, one old musk-rat cap served the youngest three boys. The earliest riser wearing it, and the others going barehead. And on this dress (full dress) occasion, it is worth the trouble to describe the costumes. I can see them now. I could describe all but mother's. She then

dressed like her daughters and other pioneer women, but lived to don the best of wear, and grace it too. To deck her out in frontier style now seems a sacrilege. All the girls wore cotton gowns of the same stuff as their bonnets, and as the boys' shirts, the difference was such as only the inherent taste and skill of woman could devise from the means at hand. The fabric was bought in bolts, and was white, but after it underwent all the possible alterations of color to be obtained from the use of walnut bark and hulls, chamber lye, copperas, sumac, indigo and madder, each girl was furnished a separate hue, and each boy an appropriate color. The suit I wore I thought had ruined me, for the next day when I went in my soft buckskin breeches and white cotton shirt to the swimming hole, I found the color and perspiration of the day before had stained my skin, while the jeans had taken hold of my leather-polished legs like hooks of steel. Going to meeting all sat flat in the bottom of the wagon, except father and mother, who sat in chairs. The girls and younger boys all wore bonnets, and every bonnet was a golden crown. It seems to me every settler's bonnet was yellow. And when father, sitting upright, whip in hand, got the oxen under way, the waving, nodding bunch of bonnets looked indeed unique. Father's figure is to be described as a type of the settler, and is not unlike the popular representations of "Uncle Sam" in outline. A tall bell-crowned, black fur hat; a stock that kept his chin in air; a "dicky" hiding the flannel shirt front; coat and trousers of blue home-made jeans, and boots of great size and strength. And final mark of gala day attire, the fawn-skin "wescot" or vest. This, from the skin of the beautiful spotted fawns we killed, made a handsome addition to an otherwise appropriate costume (hardly, though, for the month of August). Out on the trail toward the ford, the oxen swing along in a really graceful, and not slow gait, keeping their heels out of the way of the wagon wheels going down one grade, and humping and squirming

under the lash going up the next. Finally, on the river bank, where other settlers have already congregated, father directs the oxen in and out among the trees merely with a "gee" and "haw," and at last into the edge of a walnut's shade. John unhitches the oxen from the wagon, and drives them, like those of the other settlers, into the woods. The yellow bonnets and blue jeans breeches each looks out for herself and himself, respectively. One thing, however, must be remarked. Father, all deference to mother in our cabin home, now leaves her after frontier fashion to look after herself and baby, not even lending her a hand down from the wagon. Mother passes the baby to Maria, who, with the boys, has sprung to the ground. She then goes toward the group of women under the tree, while the boys and girls scatter among the children of their age and acquaintance.

Presently the preacher, a Baptist, to which denomination the Claytons belonged, strode down toward the water's edge, and, turning toward the rising bank, took off his hat and laid it at his feet. In loud, clear, monotone, with slow movement and quaint inflection, he lines out:

Think O my soul! The *dread* - ful day
When this in - cens - ed God—

chopping off the last word and "raising the tune" of Dunlap's creek. The women, in imitation, are just drawling out the sonorous "Gawd," when he strikes "rend" in

Shall *rend* the skies and burn the seas
And fling his wrath a - broad!

What were, when he began, a number of scattered squads, now took the form of moving individuals. From the shady spots came the older men; from the wagons above the bank, and from the canoes which brought many from up, down and across the river, came younger men and boys all toward the white haired figure. The women who had sat bonneted beneath the tree, bared their heads. The elderly men walked down and sat apart from the women. Each one carefully selected his spot, composed himself as best he could, and

after a pause which was never omitted, and for which I could never account, slowly and deliberately removed his hat. This custom, indulged in by the younger men as well, of entering the congregation, taking seat, and awaiting the beginning of the service before baring the head, was common even in a much later day. This first service was, like all such events in a sparsely settled country, widely heralded and largely attended. There were perhaps a hundred people, including many Indians. These, after the settlers all took places, gathered, standing, around the edges of the crowd. With their blankets over their shoulders and heads bare, they were a picturesque feature of the crowd. This tree, by the way, may have been selected as the first meeting place, because of its familiar form and situation. It is certain that the Indians made it a common meeting place among themselves and with the settlers. It was beneath this tree, in citizens' clothes and with great stove pipe hat, that I last saw Black Hawk. He was lying asleep or drunk, in its shade, a party of his tribe having moored their canoes near by.

I do not know the text from which Mr. Hill preached, nor whether it had any relation whatever to his discourse. But I do remember his face and figure, and a part of what he said. I was filled with awe at the time. I had been somewhat frightened at different times, both from Indian and hunting stories, and from vague hints about perdition. I seldom pass that elm tree to this day, but that I unconsciously look at its roots as I did that day at Mr. Hill's direction when he screamed: "Oh sinner, Look! Look! (bending with hands nearly to the ground) while I take off the hatch of HELL!" and with his long bony finger and writhing body he pictured the tortures of the damned. He did this after so arranging matters that I was sure young people in general, and I, in particular, were but a few inches above the rotten ridge pole of the burning pit.

What a relief when he quit. After lining another well

known common meter hymn, those who had sat through his two hours of agony joined him in the song, and I caught my first idea of what gentle soothing music brings. This hymn, like a hundred others I have heard beneath that tree, and like thousands such as the settlers sang out doors in early times, might be described. Not the words—these are preserved. Not the notes—these are familiar. But what will not the future offer for a fragment of a frontier sacred chorus! But it may be sufficient to suggest that when the leader “raised the tune” he sang alone for half a line, then a voice or two near him took it up; led slowly by the leader and by others retarded, the volume was increased and the time delayed. The rear rank joined perhaps a full beat later, and every throat but the Indians’ poured its suppressed ardor on the air. An enlivening scene even to the red-skin, what was it to impressionable, sympathetic, ecstatic youth. I did not shout that day, but elsewhere, under the same influences I have many times seen the ground literally strewn with writhing, screaming penitents, strangling for relief. That great volume of discordant sound grew harmonious in a large sense, for it softened, rolled and echoed back from across the stream.

I know that the customs of those times, the style of dress and music have all passed away. I am thankful for the changes time has brought. But there is a matter I would like to know. Were we foolish, spiritual gluttons in that day, or are religious people now only finding crumbs beneath the table of the Lord?

COL. GEORGE CROGHAN, the gallant defender of Ft. Stephenson, who has held the office of Inspector General of the U. S. Army, for the last eighteen years, passed up on the Ohio a few evenings since, on a visit of inspection to the N. W. military posts. The old fellow wore the flowers of health on his cheeks, and looked as though there were several good fights in him yet.—*The Bloomington Herald*, Sept. 8, 1843.

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