

PIONEER TALES

BY DON BUCHAN

The following article by Don Buchan, Spencer, Iowa, has previously been printed in the Spencer Times and appears here by permission of Mr. Buchan and the Spencer Times. Mr. Buchan has written many historical yarns and has published a book, Here Is Yesterday, which may be obtained by writing to Mr. Buchan, 919 E. 7th Street, Spencer, Iowa.

The old accounts tell us that Frank and Jesse James et al robbed the bank at Corydon in Wayne county of \$40,000; that they split up. Jesse, disguised as a farm hand, fell in with a band of men searching for the bandits. He told them he was searching for strayed, stolen horses, rode with them for a while, and then, on a pretext, separated.

There have long been rumors that Frank and Jesse James spent the night in a house south of Paulina. My parents told of neighbors in Palo Alto county who whispered that "The Boys" had stopped for dinner.

Ralph McCullah of Ruthven tells of farmers in Palo Alto county who entertained mysterious strangers who astonished their hosts by shooting the heads off chickens selected for the dinner table.

The *Emmetsburg Democrat* in 1958 carried a story told by Mrs. Lula Johnson, then 84 years of age. Here are excerpts from it:

"One evening a stranger rode up on his horse and asked for a night's lodging. As there was no meat for supper, someone suggested that the boys get some wild game. They could have their choice of going out into the marsh with a sack and stick, get wild geese and ducks just ready to fly which could be caught and sacked, or shoot some prairie chickens, quail or grouse.

"As the chickens were plentiful that year they decided to get them for supper. Mother always warned them not to get too many, just what they needed. The stranger said he would like to go with the boys. They took their rifles and while they shot one chicken, he always shot two at once with a gun in each hand. Later we heard this stranger was Jesse James.

"His brother had spent the night at a neighbor's. They traveled together in the daytime but separated every night."



JESSE JAMES

Ralph McCullah has a number of these tales. "I'll keep searching," he said. "If I find anything substantial, I'll give you a ring."

Eventually he struck pay dirt. "Tell Don to drive over," he told my wife on the telephone. "My wife and I want to take him to an elderly gentleman in Graettinger who has a fund of stories of the pioneer days, including one about Frank and Jesse James."

At the home of Mr. and Mrs. Peter Duhn in Graettinger we were welcomed inside by Mrs. Duhn and I was introduced to "Pete" Duhn, now in his 95th year. Mr. Duhn's eyesight has failed, although "some days I can read a little." He has difficulty in hearing even with "my machine" as he calls his hearing aid. But pioneer history flows freely from his lips and he loves to talk of old times.



PETER DUHN

"My father, L. P. 'Lars' Duhn, first came here in 1868," he said. "But he returned to Racine, Wisconsin, and then back to Denmark. The next year, 1869, he came here and settled.

"I remember a Dane who sold his oxen to a German. The oxen were well trained to obey voice commands, but didn't understand German. Only Danish. The German finally called on my father for help. Father spoke to the oxen in Danish and they obeyed.

"The first furrow was made with the driver guiding the oxen by 'Gee' or 'Haw' and an occasional touch of the whip. After the first furrow, oxen would plow straighter than a horse. They could handle a heavier load, too. Actually, they didn't pull. The yoke rested on their shoulders and was pinned around their necks so they really pushed.

"Turnips were planted on the newly broken sod and these were cut up and fed to the oxen during the winters. I remember when the railroad track was being laid. There were scores of men and many oxen, but no horses. I asked what was going on. They're building a railroad, someone answered. It didn't mean a thing to me for I had never seen a railroad train . . .!

"The trip to Fort Dodge took three days and nights each way. We slept under the wagons, bundled up in buffalo robes and buffalo coats.

"Once Father made a trip to the mill at Milford. He staked out a trail across the trackless prairie by driving stakes in the tall prairie grasses. When he returned he had my brother and me take a load of grain to the mill. We were only about seven or eight years old, and thought it quite an adventure.

"Before Emmetsburg had a name it was just called the 'Irish Colony.' It was west of its present site, and the few cabins were huddled on the banks of the Des Moines river. Martin Coonan had a flour and lumber mill there. When they were building the dam a man named Pawn fell into the river. He would have drowned except for his dog. That dog jumped into the water, got-a-hold of him and struggled toward shore.

Mr. Coonan leaped on his horse and spurred him to where he thought he could grab Mr. Pawn as he floated by, but the dog had dragged him to safety before Mr. Coonan's help was needed.

"Mr. Pawn crawled out on the bank, shook himself, looked at his dog and gasped, 'That dog—when he dies I'm going to give him a REAL funeral.'

"The first settlers didn't select their places because of the level land or fertility of the soil. That was everywhere for the taking. They built their homes where timber and water were available. At first folks lived by trapping fur animals and hunting deer, ducks, geese, and prairie chickens. Prairie chickens were everywhere, easy to shoot, and mighty good eating at any time.

"Once John Nelson took a herd of cattle to Sioux City, driving them and grazing them all the way.

"When he got back home there came a rap on his door about midnight. He called out, 'Just a minute 'till I get my pants on.' Then he hastily donned his trousers and slipped out the back door. He hid in the timber and stayed under cover until daylight. For weeks afterwards he and others tried to find out if any of his neighbors had called on him that night, but none had. They decided someone had followed him all the way from Sioux City to rob him of the money he got for the cattle.

"I remember a family named Brennan. There were 14 in the family. One of the girls decided to get work so she could earn some money for herself. There were mighty few jobs for women so she put on her brother's clothing and posed as a man. At one house the man was going to hire her, but the wife said, 'No. That man won't work. Why his hands are as soft as a lady's.

"She reached one place at dusk and as was customary, 'he' was asked to come inside and eat supper. Night had fallen before the dishes were washed, so 'he' was invited to stay the night. In the morning, her father, who had been searching most of the night, came to this place. When he told them their new hired 'man' was his daughter they almost fainted . . . !

"When the homesteaders got things to going and farming the land, they raised hogs. A number of them would get together and dress out their hogs and one or two would haul them to market in Fort Dodge.

"I remember the price for dressed hogs hauled all the way to the city . . . It was \$1.35 a hundred!

"I remember in the early days when an Indian came through the country. He was friendly and pointed to two boys and told their folks he wanted to 'feel their heads.' Gingerly the boys sided up to him, wondering what he was up to. He felt their heads and said, 'Now Indian never forget these boys. Always remember them. Even when grow up to be men.' I always wondered about that.

"Homesteaders finally got some milk cows. They would make butter and sell it in town. Mother used to get seven cents a pound for her butter, but some others got less. One family had some firkins of butter stored for—well, too long. It wasn't very sweet. They took it to the storekeeper and when he got a whiff of it he shook his head. 'Take it over there' he said, pointing to another store. 'Maybe that fellow will buy it. He doesn't have any sense of smell.'

"They had to sell their butter for three cents a pound and take it out in wares in order to get rid of it.

"There used to be a store, post office, and creamery in Fallow. The 'new' creamery building is still standing as is the

frame building that housed the store. The blacksmith shop is gone. John Hanses used to haul the mail to Fallow from Graettinger.

"Once my father had 1,800 muskrat pelts to sell. Two men came through and wanted to buy them. Father asked 13 cents a pelt and the eldest of the two wouldn't bid more than twelve and a half.

"The younger man had silver buttons down the side of his trousers and my brother and I watched him like a hawk, hoping one of the silver pieces would fall off.

"Finally the younger man said, 'Oh, give him the 13 cents.'

"The older one said, 'He goes wild when he gets out into the country.' But he paid 13 cents for each of the hides.

"There was very little cash money in circulation on the frontier, and when the men went to pay, there was a \$100 bill included in the money. Father was afraid to accept it. He had never seen a bill of that denomination. Finally he took it, but he looked the men over closely and carefully so he could identify them if there was anything wrong with that \$100 bill.

"After a time the James gang robbed the bank in Wayne county of \$40,000 and the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific train near Adair. When the big city newspapers reached us, there was the story and pictures of Frank and Jesse James and their descriptions. Father took a good look and shouted, 'Why those are the two men who bought my muskrat hides!'

"It seemed they were traveling as fur buyers while laying out an escape route. The officers would expect them to head south into Missouri, you see."

We thanked Mr. and Mrs. Duhn, and left their home convinced of Mr. Duhn's absolute sincerity.

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