

EXCERPTS FROM "HISTORY OF THE VALLEY"

BY WATSON KNIGHT

The "History of the Valley" is written by 99-year-old Watson Knight, a resident of the Spring Valley Manor, Perry, Iowa. Mr. Knight's history describes the families and times of the area west of the Des Moines River at the Dallas and Boone county dividing line across from the old Elk Rapids Post Office and south two miles to the Chestnut Ford Bridge. The following excerpts just tell part of the story, the "History" in total can be seen in the manuscript collection in the Iowa State Historical Library.

On the east side of the Des Moines River in Boone county there was a ferry boat which had an old plow shear hung on a tree limb with a hammer to beat it with when you wanted to cross the river. The boat was wide enough and long enough to drive across a team of oxen or horses hitched to a wagon. The approach was hinged at both ends of the boat, so wagons could be driven on, then the approach, or apron, would be pulled up by a rope known as a "snub rope." At either side of the river, stakes were firmly placed so that when you let the approach down you would quickly jump to shore and fasten the upper stream corner of the boat so that the current would not swing the boat around sideways. It was quite a profession in those days to be able to handle a ferry boat, and each passenger had to pay 25 cents, so you could not go to town often since it would cost 50 cents round-trip, which did not leave much money to buy sugar, coffee and tobacco, so you might have to take a chicken or two along to trade.

William Winslow had what we called a cane mill where he made sorghum molasses for those who raised sorghum cane. The cane was prepared by cutting off the seed top and stripping the blades of the stalks, then the cane was cut off at the

ground and delivered to Winslow's mill. Here the cane was run through two iron rollers propelled by horse power, and the juice was caught in a barrel which was then carried in buckets to a pan where it was boiled down to sorghum molasses. This pan was about six feet long with wooden boards rounded up at the ends for sides and a piece of sheet metal about three feet wide on the bottom. The pan was placed over a furnace that was not as wide as the pan, so the wood sides of the pan would not be burned. The furnace was located in the ground where there was a sudden rise of a foot or so of dirt. A short chimney was placed at the back of the furnace and the fire was fed with old tree limbs gathered in the woods. Winslow had to watch over the pan as it heated to a point where a green scum arose, for the secret of good sorghum was to remove the scum quickly before it could boil back into the juice. The skimming device was a piece of scrap tin shapped something like a dust pan and fastened onto an old broom handle. The skimmings were placed in a barrel where chemical action took place and it turned into a high grade vinegar, free to those who wanted to carry it away. Sorghum was valued at 30 to 40 cents per gallon and Winslow would have to find a store market somewhere that would pay for it in calico for his girls' dresses, plus a small amount of coffee, pepper and salt; otherwise the family raised what they had to eat.

Another memory of mine is of gathering corn with Dow Davis who lived on "Granny" Wallace's grounds, where Ting Wilson lives today. It was cold, and Dow had one of those old-fashioned, large iron kettles which he hung on a long coupling pole in his wagon so that it stuck out slightly farther than the back of the wagon. This kettle was filled with live, hot coals so when our fingers got too cold, we could warm them over the kettle. In those days people thought they had to drive straddle of one row of corn, leaving two standing rows of corn on either side of the wagon. This center row was called the "down row" since the wagon broke it down. It was the boy's job to pick the "down row" as you had to be in a stooping position all the time and this made a man's back ache, but did it matter if a boy's back got tired?

My father decided to build a grist mill for corn meal and flour, and as he was a millwright among other professions, he took over the construction of the mechanical parts while others erected the main building. The building was constructed next to the steam engine which provided the power for the mill. When the enterprise was completed it operated each Saturday and business prospered. The shelling of ear corn was a problem so some customers had to turn a scoop shovel upside down over a half bushel basket and rake the ear of corn up and down across the front of the scoop to shell the corn. Next a hand sheller operated by a crank was installed, and soon afterwards, Father advised that they install a power sheller which would enable the farmers to just drive up next to it and shovel the ear corn into it.



WATSON KNIGHT AT AGE 99

The mill was to two-story building because the corn or wheat had to be elevated and fed down into the grinding burs and the wheat had to be again elevated to a bolting chest on the second floor. The bolting chest was a hexagon-shaped cylinder about five feet in diameter and ten or more feet long. It was covered with fine silk about a yard wide at the end where the ground wheat first entered so that nothing but flour could pass through. The next yard was covered with a coarser silk and a second grade of flour, called "shorts," went through it, leaving the bran to pass through the bolting chest. Each product was sent down a square spout made from boards six inches wide with a grain sack fastened to the outlet to catch the different products. At this time, the bran was only a waste product and if the cattle ate it they would bloat up and die. Consequently, some bran was utilized in a drink for hogs and the remainder was dumped into the river.

Kindling to start coal fires in the locomotives of this time was produced by a tread mill. The wood was cut from four foot lengths of cord wood by horses walking on a slanting wood floor. Cleats were placed across it so the horses feet would not slide from under them. The floor traveled like a belt over wood rollers as the horses travelled up hill, so to speak, and the power was governed by the slant of the floor. The tread mill could not run without using the saw or it would go faster and faster, and the brake lever was nearby in case of an emergency.

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