

MEMOIRS OF PIONEER DAYS

by Theodore F. Grefe

Edited with an Introduction
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Although my grandfather was not a particularly talkative man, many of my happiest recollections of him are of those times when he would tell of his early life in Des Moines. A short time before his death in 1937, I asked him to write some of his early experiences for me. Written originally in pencil in a small notebook, this is his account of the everyday details of pioneer life.

In transcribing his story, the primary consideration was to make an accurate copy. My grandfather used very little punctuation, but, in the interest of clarity, some punctuation has been introduced. The capitalization is as he wrote it.



Theodore Grefe

Born in Brownsville, Penn., July 31, 1856. The fact that James G. Blaine (Republican presidential candidate in 1884) was born in the same Town no doubt is what made him famous. My first Treck started when I was eight months old. Leaving Brownsville in March, 1857 by steamer on the Monongehela River to Pittsburgh—From there also by steamer down the Ohio River to its Junction with the Mississippi, thence North to Keokuk, Iowa (and) from there to Des Moines in a covered wagon. The trip lasted about three weeks. Needless to say I did not realize what was going on.

Our family came from Keokuk to Des Moines in a covered wagon because Steam Boats did not run to Des Moines except during High Water and coming as we did in March there was no High Water. My oldest Brother who came west some months later from Brownsville, came to Des Moines by Steamer. The landing was at what was called Coon-Point near the junction of the two Rivers. Whenever a Steam-Boat whistled coming up the River the whole Town rushed down to see it come in.

There was a nest of small houses West of fifteenth street South of Sycamore (now Grand Avenue) about ten in number. Our family of eight lived in two rooms about 12 x 16 to which Father added a shed or Summer Kitchen. Fortunately when we moved from Brownsville our goods were packed in some Very large Boxes with hinged lids. During the day the Bedding, Clothing etc. could be stored in the boxes and at night our beds would be spread on top of the boxes. There was only one Well in the neighborhood which had to supply everybody, with the exception of Rain Barrells and water hauled from Coon River.

Later on my Father bought a *large* house consisting of two rooms on first floor and a large room above covering the two below. Father had a Sheep Skin Rug made on which four or five of us slept. Our folks were hospitable so when a large family moved to our town and had no place to stay we took them in until they could get located. There were six or eight children in the bunch and I presume the old man fearing we would not take them in—failed to tell us the whole family had the Itch or prairie digs. The result was that our family all caught it. It was no fun and took us a long time to get rid of it. So much for Pioneer Hospitality.

We all had recovered from the Itch but our relief was short lived for the Boys referred to brought it back to us from the West and we had our second siege from which it took quite a while to recover. Our bodies were immersed in Lard and Sulphur for days and in addition we had to take Sulphur internally—until our blood was purified.

My first distinct recollection of Events was Abraham Lincoln's first campaign for the Presidency. I was just a Very small boy with a Toy Drum watching the Parade from the top of the fence. The Parade consisted principally of Lumber Wagons, Hay Racks a few Buck Boards—All crowded with people.

In pioneer days our sole illumination was Tallow Candles. When we got cheering news from the front (during the Civil War) the stores would be illuminated with Candles. A half Barrel Hoop would be bored full of holes and candles stuck in the holes, the whole thing placed in the store windows. Boxes and Barrels (were) piled in the street for a Bon-fire. Many a night I have sat with a Tallow Candle reading until driven to bed. When my Father brought home a small glass Kerosene Lamp, we thought we were sitting pretty. We did not have to hug the Candle to see.

Next came Gas and when we had Street Lights with a single Gas burner we thought (it) the end of perfection. My first glimpse of an Electric Light was when a Travelling show played in Moor's Opera House. The main feature of the Show was that it would be lighted with Electricity. They planted a Dynamo on Walnut Street and strung their wires through a window. They had an Arc-light outside to draw the crowd. The Auditorium was made brilliant with two Ark Lights. It was a grand success but not having the wherewithall to get inside, I had to be content with what I heard about it.

Over shoes, Rubbers and Rubber Boots were not in the market at that time. We wore Cow Hide Boots well soaked with Tallow and Bees-wax to make them water-proof. The Pioneer cure for bad colds was Camomile or Elder Berry blossom Tea taken hot and then a good sweat between Feather beds.

My Father owned the only extensive Slaughter House located in a Hollow north of Grand Avenue and west of Seventeenth Street. There was no transportation then. Hogs Cattle and Sheep were driven in on foot. Frequently the roads would be crowded with Hogs or Cattle as they were driven many miles. A Stray Steer or Hogs given out by the

long trip were picked up by any one who could handle them sometimes paying a small sum and at other times took them as abandoned property. No slaughtering was done during the summer as there was no Ice or refrigeration. The Slaughter House hands were a mixed lot—Quarrels and fights were frequent. One man was the Bully of the Gang. No one dared to contradict him without getting licked. He had two boys who inherited his disposition and scarcely a day passed without a fight. They all three died with their boots on.

My first School was a German private school on Walnut Street near Second Street. When four years old, I trudged from 16th St. north of Grand Ave. to Second and Walnut St. through snow mud or dust in my cow hide boots. I was born left-handed and though my parents tried nearly every device to change me, they did not succeed. But the Herr Professor changed me in one respect. On my first day I was given a slate and Pencil for some purpose and naturally took the Pencil in my left hand and started to copy my lesson. The Herr Professor came stalking up behind me with a good sized Hazel Switch in his hand. He brought (it) down on my Knuckles and commanded me to take my pencil in the other hand and never again let him catch me using my left hand when writing. Suffice to say that while I attended his school I used my right hand and became so accustomed to it that I never went back to left handed penmanship. The cure was drastic but it worked. My German education was limited to the extent of being able to read the Catechism to my Mother.

I next attended Public School at Ninth and Locust St. up to the time I finished the third grade. Then attended a private school conducted by Leonard Brown at Seventh and Center Sts. until my education reached the Eighth grade when I returned to the Public School and to my surprise found the same Teacher. During my third grade attendance it seemed to me she took every occasion to use the Switch or a ruler. Perhaps I was uncouth and unruly and needed chastisement but it seemed to me then that many of my lickins were uncalled for. When I came back to the Eighth

grade she was very cordial and there were no more lickins—no doubt because I had grown to be more like a human being and studied my lessons. The eighth grade is as far as I got in Public School after which I took a course in a Commercial College—So much for my schooling.

As for sports all I needed was to shoulder a shotgun (and) go out along the River or through the brush to scare up game. My handicap was the Gun, an old muzzle loader. The hammer spring was so weak I usually had to snap it several times before it would fire. In the meantime the Game would disappear. There was good Fishing in Coon River but I never had any luck. I could sit beside my chum on the bank, throw my line alongside of his and watch him pull out Fish after Fish while I never got a bite. Swimming in the Coon River was Great Sport. There were no Carnegie Medals (medals awarded for acts of bravery by the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission from a trust fund established in 1904) distributed in those days or Des Moines would be full of them. It was quite frequent that some urchin would get beyond his depth and would be pulled out by some bigger boy. It was all in a days work and as a rule the parents never knew how near they came to losing their Boy. I had the good luck to pull one urchin out but it never occurred to me that I was a Hero. I made no mention of it and tried to keep it from the Kids family the same as I did at another time when gathering wild Grapes with a neighbor boy. He became ambitious and climbed a large tree. When about fifteen feet in the Air, he spotted a nice lot of Grapes out on the end of a limb. About the time he was ready to gather the grapes, the limb broke and he came hurtling down. Fortunately there was nothing on the ground on which he could fall and the ground was a sand-bar. He fell flat on his back and it seemed to me he was at least a quarter of an hour recovering the breath that was knocked out of him by the fall. His first admonition was that I should not tell his mother. I never did.

The first Base Ball Diamond was located on Walnut St. about 14th St. There were no Houses or fences between 15th and 10th Sts. The Game was played with a live ball and a

good Batter often sent the Ball over into Fords Blacksmith Shop on North side of Grand Avenue. The Pitcher had to pitch the Ball. No underhand throw was allowed. No wonder the scores were heavy. The Catcher stood way back and if he caught the Ball on first bounce, the Batter was out if he missed the Ball. (If the batter missed the ball and the catcher caught it on the first bounce, the batter was out.) The first match game I remember was between the Des Moines Team and Proud Mahsha of Oskaloosa who drove to Des Moines in a side seat wagon. The game lasted all afternoon and the Score as I remember it was 72 to 68 in favor of the Visitors. It took us younger Boys quite awhile to master Base Ball. Our sport was Town-Ball, One Old Cat or 2 Old Cat played with Home made Ball and a wagon stake for a Bat.

The County Fair was a great attraction but how to get in without the requisite Quarter was a problem. This was overcome owing to the fact that the Association issued season family Tickets. One of our neighbors had such a Ticket. After taking his family in, one of his boys would take the Ticket to some obscure corner of the fence, poke it through a crack to the boys waiting outside. They would then pass through the Gate. How many got in this way I am unable to state. However the Association did not lose anything because none who went in that way had money and could not have bought a ticket.

Boys 12 or 14 years of Age are adventurous. My chum and I decided one day we wanted a canoe so shouldering our Axes, we started up Coon River to find a suitable log. We trudged nearly as far as Walnut Creek before we found a log that we thought would make a good Canoe. We found the log Hard as iron and after hacking at it (with) dull Axes without making much of an impression, we decided we did not want a canoe. Neither did we want to walk back to town. There being plenty of drift-wood we conceived the idea of building a Raft which we did binding the logs together with Grape Vines. We launched our Raft, using long poles to guide it. One of the poles got stuck in the Raft, the long end probably eight feet below and about four feet up.

As we were gliding down stream we came to a place where the water was not so deep and the Pole caught on the bottom which threw the upper end forward. As I was standing in front of the upper, the Pole caught me and shoved me off, giving me a good ducking. I managed to climb back and continue our Voyage. Soon we came to a big stump in mid-stream. Our poles were not long enough to guide the Raft and it looked like a shipwreck but fortunately just before we reached the stump, we could reach bottom with our poles and steered away from disaster. We floated down to within a half a mile of the end of our journey and discovered a Rapids we did not care to run with our make shift raft so polled to the shore and disembarked. Being bare-foot we did not realize what we were into until we started to walk when we found the Ground full of Sand Burs and Very painful walking. Taking it all in all our adventure was not a howling success.

When about seven or eight years old I attended a concert in the old Court House given by the Soldiers Orphans for the benefit of the Home. One feature Captivated me. A Boy about my own age dressed in Uniform sang a Song I never heard before or since. In order that the song may not be entirely lost when I pass on, not knowing whether there is another Soule that knows it, I am giving it as I remember it.

SONG CORPORAL SCHNAPPS

¹Mine heart is broken into little bits
 I told you Friends what for
 My sweet-heart one good patriotic girl
 She drove me off mit the war.
 I fights for her the Battles of der Flag
 I strikes as brave as I can
 But now long time She nix remembers me
 Und goes mit another Man.

Chorus

O Mine Freulein you is so Very unkind
 You goes mit Hans to Germany to live
 Und leaves poor Schnapps behind
 Leaves poor Schnapps behind.

²I march all day no matter if the Storm
 Is worse than Moses flood
 I lays all night my head upon a stump
 And sinks to sleep in the mud
 The nightmare comes. I catch him very bad
 I dreams I sleeps with a Ghost
 I wakes next morning, Frozen in the Ground
 So stiff as one stone Post.

Chorus

³They gives me hard bread Tougher as a rock
 It almost breaks my jaw
 I splits him sometimes with an Iron Wedge
 Und cuts him up with a saw
 They gifs me Beef so Very Very Salt
 Like Sodom's Wife you know.
 I surely thinks they put him in the Brine
 One hundred years ago.

Chorus

⁴By and By we takes a City in the south
 Und stays there One whole year.
 I gets me Sour Krout much as I can eat.
 Und plenty of Lager Beer.
 I meets a Lady Rebel in the street
 So handsome ever I see
 I makes to her one Very Galant Bow
 But Oh she spits on me.

Chorus

⁵Hard times you say what for you Volunteers
 I told you friend what for
 My sweet heart one good patriotic Girl
 She drove me off mit the war
 I fights for her the Battles of der Flag
 But now long time she nix-remembers Me
 Und goes mit another man.

Chorus

This selection was submitted by Mrs. James Love, a member of the newspaper staff in the State Department of History and Archives, and a granddaughter of Mr. Grefe. In addition to the editorial additions made by Mr. Mehlin, a minimum of reorganization was made in the presentation of this portion of the memoirs. A copy of the original complete manuscript is in the Iowa State Historical Library.

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