AN IOWA FARM IN THE MAKING: 1867-1900

by Joseph C. Austin
Detroit, Michigan

J. C. Austin

Mr. Austin graduated from Iowa State College in 1902 with a degree in mechanical engineering. Having worked in locomotive designing and automobile engineering, in 1914 he became Detroit District Manager for the Tubular Rivet and Stud Company of Boston, Mass., the position he held until his retirement in 1949.

The following account is of the birth and growth of a farm in Dickinson county owned by Mr. Austin's parents, Joseph and Mary Olivia Austin, from 1867 to 1900. Accompany photographs are courtesy of the author.

For those who did not see the prairie country of northern Iowa as nature made and the white man found it, its beauty is difficult to visualize. With each season of the year its picture changed. As the warm winds of spring began to blow from the south, the prairie grass sprouted up through the top soil as if eager to cover the bleakness winter had left.

In a few weeks all was green with early wild flowers beginning to dot the landscape. The pink wind flowers were the first to bloom on the hilltops, even before the snow was all melted from the shaded lowlands. Overhead, large flocks of ducks, geese and other waterfowl winged their way, hurrying to get to their nesting grounds further north. A number of these, as if tired from flight and enticed by the ponds and lakes of clear water in northwestern Iowa, decided to remain and spend the summer raising their young.

As the days grew warmer, various species of land birds arrived and filled the air with their songs. The deep frost thawed from the ground and thousands of frogs appeared from their winter quarters, announcing their arrival with familiar croaks. Insects of many descriptions flitted about and buzzed in their own peculiar languages.

The summer winds fanned the tall grass into waves as it blew over the hills and vales. In many areas not a tree could be seen. Rainfall was abundant and clear water flowed in many creeks and rivulets. The lakes and large streams were filled with a variety of fish. Field mice, gophers and rabbits were often seen. Small snakes, although harmless, crawled in the grass near the water courses and flashed out their red tongues to frighten intruders. Game birds were flushed from the grass as their enemies came near. This was the midyear picture under the warm sun.

But as the summer began to wane and the autumn months approached, the scene changed. The greens faded to reds, yellows and then to browns. Insects and most birds disappeared, while the small land animals retreated to their havens. Vegetation wilted and withered, and with the coming of heavy frost, all above ground became dormant. Future growth would have to come from seeds and roots.

To protect these sources of life, nature soon covered the landscape with a thick blanket of snow. This the cold winter winds blew furiously and piled up deep drifts in sparsely sheltered spots. The land became an expanse of white, and except for the whir of the wind and an occasional howl of a wolf, all was still. Only hardy fur-bearing animals ventured about. If man attempted to cross these prairies in midwinter, he had to be well protected from wind and cold and know well his route, for landmarks and shelter were few.

It was into this environment of changing seasons that the early settlers of the Dickinson county prairies came in the 1850s and 1860s. Previously, only bands of Indians, mostly members of the Sioux tribe, roamed the area hunting and fishing. The first white men to venture through were trappers and hunters who kept close to the timber along the shores of the lakes. Then came more daring settlers who built log cabins in the woods near the lakes, some to be mercilessly murdered by the Indians.

The rich soil of the prairie land was very evident and attractive to settlers who arrived to stake out "homesteads" as soon as the land had been surveyed. Among these rugged pioneers were my parents, Joseph and Mary Olivia Austin.

They arrived from Lake Crystal, Minn. in 1867 bringing with them their oldest son, William, and all their earthly possessions in a lumber wagon drawn by two young horses. After living for a time in the Okoboji settlement, they decided to comply with the homestead law, and in 1870 acquired a quarter section of land in Center Grove township.

Joseph Austin

Mary Olivia Austin

The land was covered with thick sod and there was not a tree on it. A low flat ridge ran east and west across the farm, dividing it into almost equal halves. Across the northeast corner ran a creek called the Spring Run which had a considerable flow of water the year round, except in very dry seasons. Also on the land were three — really four, but two were closely connected — sloughs in which water stood throughout the year.

While the soil was rich black loam, there were scattered about sizable stones which were a hinderance to cultivation. Since some of the higher ground could not be cultivated until the stones were removed, many days of hard work were required to loosen and haul them away. During my father's ownership, hundreds of tons of these rocks were moved off the land. Some of the rocks were used for construction work, but my father gladly gave them to anyone who would haul

them away. As a lad, I often wondered where these troublesome stones came from. Later I learned that they were left by icebergs thousands of years ago that had drifted over the area and melted. The icebergs gouged the earth to form the surrounding hills and dug the beds of the lakes in that part of Iowa.

One of the first problems confronting a homesteader was the building of a house and a stable. Just where on his land to locate these buildings was a question. A ready supply of pure water was essential so the site was often selected where a shallow well could be dug with the means at hand. My father chose a site near the south edge of his land where the well was dug fifteen rods from one of the sloughs. Here, with the help of a new neighbor, Paul Roberts, who had settled on some land a mile to the east, a two-room log cabin was built. While living in Okoboji, my parents gained possession of an acre of land in the woods near one of the lakes, and there the logs were cut. The cabin served as the family home until 1880. Three more Austin children, including this writer, were born there.

The stable for the horses and cattle was a rather crude affair constructed with the means at hand. Posts with crotches at the top were set in the ground at the four corners. These supported two end rails upon which were placed cross rails. The whole structure was then covered with long hay and straw.

Another problem the early settler had to deal with was securing fuel for heating and cooking. Some managed to get along temporarily by twisting long slough hay into knots and burning them. My father cut wood from the lot near Okoboji. Coal was not available until after the coming of the railroad in 1882. I remember well the first load of coal my father brought to the farm. It was a great curiosity. I took a piece from the wagon and put it in the kitchen stove to see how the "black stuff" burned. It did not ignite readily like dry wood, and I was disgusted with the results of my experiment.

There being no other source for food vegetables, a home garden was a dire necessity. My mother secured locally and set out horse-radish plants, the roots of which were the first

vegetable we could dig from the ground in the spring. Although it brought "tears to our eyes," we enjoyed it immensely as a relish with our other food. Mother also set out tansy, wormwood and sage, the leaves of which she used in various ways. A hardy perennial that proved valuable was rhubarb or pie-plant as many called it. Father planted two long rows across the garden, and in the rich soil with proper cultivation, it grew to large size. The family used it in quantities and the neighbors were allowed to come pull all they could carry away.

Protection against the piercing winter winds of northern Iowa made the planting of trees almost a necessity. The fast growing varieties such as the cottonwood, poplar and willow were most desirable for that purpose. In fact, they were the only ones available! In time that could be spared from other work, Father planted trees on the site near the center of the farm chosen for erecting his permanent buildings. Over a period of years he set out twelve acres of these varieties. To help fill the need for fruits which were exceedingly scarce, he also set out a number of wild plum trees, "slips" for which he secured from the timber near the lake. No "tame" varieties that could withstand the cold winters were then to be had. In a few years the family harvested all the wild plums they could use and gave away many to those who had none. Father also experimented with apple trees bought from traveling nursery salesmen, but only a few crabapple trees survived.

The wild prairie grass was a great blessing, generally, but it became a serious hazard when dead and dry in the fall and spring seasons. It was very combustible and when a fire carelessly or accidentally got started in it, there was trouble. Fanned by the wind, a fire would spread and travel at unbelievable speed while unprotected buildings and stacks of hay and grain were destroyed instantaneously. All experienced settlers were keenly aware of the danger and the scent of burning grass alerted young and old. Fortunately, but largely due to extreme care in handling fire and providing fire "breaks," no serious damage occurred on our farm while my parents owned it. Only one straw stable was destroyed and this by fire of unknown origin.

An incident later related to me by my parents happened one evening in 1880 when I was two years old. A fire was burning through the area near the farm and Father and the older children went out to protect a haystack. Mother remained at the log house to feed and to put me to bed. Thinking I was asleep, she slipped out, carefully closing the door. She joined the others watching the fire which had mostly passed by. Apparently Mother was uneasy about leaving me alone so sent Will to check if I was all right.

As the family returned to the house, Will came hurrying towards them shouting, "I can't find the baby!"

Frightened, everyone ran to the house. A search was begun at once. Remembering my habit of going to the stable to see the horses whenever I had the opportunity, Father started in that direction, calling my name. He soon discovered me by the stable door.

Years later, my father stated that never in all his life — his Army experiences included — was he more scared than he was that night. Mother explained that at the time, I had just learned to unlatch the door, and upon awakening had gone to look for someone.

This prairie grass on open land furnished wonderful feed for cattle and horses. In the 1870s and early 1880s, cattle were allowed to run in the daytime during the greater part of the year. Each farmer had a cowbell of a certain tone strapped around the neck of one gentle cow in the drove. She was known as the "bell-cow," for when she moved the bell sounded. During certain seasons of the year, cattle had to be "watched" and kept from the grain fields. This job was very monotonous and often fell to the lot of the children of the family.

As the open land became settled, fences were a necessity as the farmers had to provide pastures of their own land. The early fences were of the "rail" variety to surround the barnyard and keep the stock in during the night. My father built the first barbed wire fence in our neighborhood. When the railroad came through, cedar posts were available at ten cents each, and with them Father surrounded 25 acres in the southeast corner of the farm with a three wire fence.

An unusual incident occurred in the late afternoon of May 10, 1879. My father was away and Mother was home alone with two of us younger children. She happened to be just outside the door of the house when she suddenly heard a roaring noise which she later described as sounding like that of an approaching railroad train. A glowing object rushed by overhead leaving a trail of dense smoke. In the days when the end of the world was being prophecied daily, such a strange occurrence was very frightening for a young woman alone with her children in a yet unpopulated region. The phenomenon was seen by others and it was soon learned that a meteor had passed over. It landed in a field 18 miles away to the northeast near Estherville in Emmet county.

In 1876 my father "proved up" on the requirements of the homestead law and received a U.S. patent dated Nov. 3, 1876, transferring the 160 acres of land to him. The patent bore the signature of U. S. Grant, then President of the United States. A year later, Father decided that as a protection for my mother, ownership of the home should be in her name. On Dec. 17, 1877, a new deed so drawn was made out and recorded in the Dickinson county records.

Then in 1880, Father built a new, two-story frame house, 18 x 24 feet, with full cellar on the new site. The lumber was hauled from Spencer to where the railroad had been built in 1878. The cellar wall was made with field stone. The carpenter work was done by a neighbor, M. C. Potter, who lived a mile to the east. New straw-covered stables were also constructed about 200 feet southeast of the house.

The work was finished about November 1, and the process of moving into the new quarters was promptly begun so that it could all be accomplished before winter arrived. Father had a flock of over 100 chickens. Most of these were young and had roosted outside on fences or bushes; they were rather wild and did not take readily to the idea of being moved. But on a warmer evening, the job was undertaken with all members of the family participating. After quite a scramble, the flock was rounded up at the new site, but darkness fell before the frightened chickens could be coaxed into the shelter provided for them. They scampered around

and hid outside near the haystacks and stable. Father decided to let them stay there until morning. That night a heavy snow storm covered the ground with a foot of wet snow, and nearly all the chickens were smothered to death. A few were found alive and rescued.

The winter 1880 in northwestern Iowa was long spoken of as "the winter of the deep snow." The snow fall that came early in November did not entirely melt off until late the next April. Frequent additional storms added to this and brought the total snow fall to several feet. Drifts of ten feet were piled up by the wind, covering fences, haystacks and low stables. Settlers had to shovel their way to get to their stables to feed and water their stock. Transportation was at a standstill for horses and vehicles could not negotiate the drifted roads. Livestock suffered because of the difficulty of getting feed to them. Where the snow was not packed, pedestrians could scarcely wallow through.

Food supplies became low. On one occasion my father and a neighbor, G. P. Clark, walked to Spirit Lake to get groceries. Fortunately, there had been a day or two of warmer weather and some of the top snow had melted a little. When the temperature dropped, an icy crust formed strong enough to bear the weight of a man. By going directly north over the prairie and crossing the East Okoboji lake on the ice, they made the 12 mile trip in one day, bringing back all the provisions they could carry.

In 1883 my father built a new barn. It was 30 x 60 feet with full basement and was patterned after barns he had seen in Illinois where he had worked as a young lad. It had stalls for eight horses and additional bins above for grain storage. Milk cows and young cattle were provided for in the basement. There was also a hay loft of 50 to 60 ton capacity.

This barn was built with first grade lumber which came from the pine forests of Michigan. The carpenter work was done by M. C. Potter and his son, Warren. The price paid for the lumber was $18 per thousand feet. [The same grade of lumber today would cost at least $150 per thousand.] That the barn was well designed and well built was evidenced by the fact that it withstood the high winds and severe

storms of that area for nearly 60 years.

At this time, Father had his boundary lines surveyed and in 1884 completed fencing the entire farm — one of the first quarter sections in the county to be so fenced. The willow trees Father had planted some years before were now large enough to supply the posts for the fence.

Three years later, a two-story west wing was added on to the house. This carpenter work was done by two Madsen brothers of Milford who were very good mechanics. In the construction, round nails made from drawn wire were used, thus supplanting the square wrought nails which had been used for centuries. This addition to the living quarters provided much comfort for the family and although modernized, the house then completed still stands today.

The Austin Home

No description of an early Dickinson county farm would be complete without mention of the "grasshopper invasion" which extended over a period of five years, 1873 to 1877. When the winged pests first appeared in June, 1873, they arrived in such swarms that they almost obscured the midday sun. Intuition seemed to lead them to the grain fields where they often devoured the entire crop, leaving the ground barren. The bewildered landowners were helpless in their efforts to protect their fields, although some men, including my father, had success using fire and smoke. Although they had no sting, the insects were everywhere, tormenting man

and beast. They sifted into the houses and got into everything. My mother related one incident which illustrated the situation. A neighbor family was visiting the Austins one Sunday and while serving the noonday meal, Mother brought in the teapot. As she poured the first cupful, out of the spout with the tea came a well boiled grasshopper. Had this occurred under other circumstances, my mother's reputation as a good cook would have been ruined.

Had the scourge lasted only one, or even two years, it wouldn't have been so unbearable, but after passing through four and five years of it, all but the bravest of the settlers lost hope. Many disposed of their belongings for what little they would bring and left the country. My father managed to save some grain each year so the family was able to survive the calamity. The area did not fully recover from the "grasshopper invasion" for several years.

Prairie settlers worked with very meager implements. Next to the necessities, a "lumber wagon" and a team of horses with harness, the need was for a "breaking" plow. This was a special plow with sharp cutting edges and a long "mould board" to cut and to turn over the sod. The sod was very tough and to tear it up so that seed grain could become imbedded in it and take root was a tedious job. This was done with a toothed "drag" drawn across the field by horses. My father was able to "break" only small acreages each year until all tillable land was under cultivation.

For harvesting the first grain crop, a "cradle" was the best tool available. This was merely a scythe with slats attached to it to catch the grain after being cut by the blade. It was not long, however, until the horse drawn reaper became available on the larger farms. Father acquired one in 1883.

In the early eighties, a few self-binders were built. A gentleman named Seth Brown, who later married my oldest sister, bought one. It was known as the "Williams twine binder," but was crude in design and very heavy. Father hired Brown to cut the grain for a couple of years.

About this time, an ingenious mechanic named Applebee invented a new type of knotter to tie the twine that was put around the grain bundle. This device was quickly adopted by makers of grain harvesters and revolutionized the industry.

One of the improved makes was the Osbourne, one of which Father bought and used for many years.

The first grain grown by the settlers was threshed with a flail. Then a rather crude, cumbersome threshing machine came into use at quite an early date. A neighbor, Reuben Hilbert, bought one and for several years did the threshing for the nearby settlers. The irony of it all was that in order to get the money to buy the machine, Hilbert mortgaged his farm. Not being able to make enough money in his operations to pay the mortgage, he lost his farm!

The grains sown on the early farms were wheat, oats, barley, corn and later flax. At first, wheat was sown on the broken sod. Then it was discovered that flax grew and produced well so it became the initial crop. Corn did not do well on fresh sod, but thrived after the second year of cultivation.

Settlers first made hay by cutting the grass with a scythe. It was not long, though, until horse drawn mowers were on the market. During the eighties and nineties, "upland prairie hay" brought the highest price on the Chicago market for feeding the horses in that city. After the railroads arrived to haul it, large quantities of this hay were shipped from Dickinson county. During the middle eighties, my father, in partnership with Seth Brown, put up 50 to 100 tons of this hay annually and shipped most of it to the Chicago market.

One of the hard tasks on the farm was that of pumping water for the stock, especially in dry seasons. To get good water, the wells had to be 65 feet deep. To save this heavy labor, in 1890 Father had a 50 foot windmill erected over the barn well. It was the first windmill in the vicinity and when completed, no other could be seen from the top of it. The fierce windstorms which swept the area were a severe test for windmills, and the first mill Father had put up blew down some years later. It was replaced by another which served until after my father sold the farm.

Even in those early days, successful farming required good management and careful work. The virgin soil was rich but to maintain its fertility after two and three years of crops, fertilizer was needed. Commercial fertilizers were then undeveloped and all that was available was stable manure.

The shiftless farmer who made no use of this had poor results and his farm soon "ran down." My father used every means at hand including all available fertilizer, crop rotation and early fall plowing to keep up his land. He was rated by his contemporaries as a first class farmer and merited well this reputation.

In writing about the life on a pioneer farm, the social, educational and cultural side should not be omitted. Farmers of the central west are a sociable people and the early pioneers were especially so. They worked long hours, but they were never too busy to engage in a brief, friendly chat as they met in the fields, on the roads or on the streets of towns. There was little formality. Strangers as well as friends were pleasantly greeted with "time of day." When time could be spared, neighborly visits were common. Folks did not just "call" for a few minutes; they came to have dinner — then the noonday meal — and often stayed on for most of the afternoon. Among the young people, evening parties and dances were frequent, especially during the winter.

The early settlers fully realized the importance of education for their offspring and took prompt action to provide for it. First established were one room ungraded district schools in which the three basic subjects of "reading, writing and arithmetic" were taught with excellent results. To broaden the curriculum, an Iowa law was enacted requiring the teaching of elementary physiology and the effects of alcohol upon the human body!

As soon as there were settlers enough in the community to warrant having them, church services were held, the Methodist Church being the most active. "Preachers" were scarce and often traveled on arranged circuits. Public school houses or halls were used for services until church buildings were provided.

In few places was the family home life developed as well as around the firesides of the early farms. Reading material was not too plentiful, but what was available was readily employed. Communication with the outside world was limited and the arrival of mail was a great event eagerly awaited. The periodicals that came to the Austin home during my teen years were *The Spirit Lake Beacon, The Milford Mail, The Sunday School Times, The Iowa State Register* and *The*

Youth's Companion. After the work of the day and the evening chores were done, we often sat around the table lighted by a kerosene lamp and read until our eyes were heavy with sleep.

While now remembered only by older people, the last publication mentioned, *The Youth's Companion,* was a weekly story magazine published in Boston, Mass., and widely subscribed to in the middle west. It exerted a heavy influence in the lives of both young and old people living in rural communities as it brought many tales of world adventure into our homes and taught us much about the great wide world. Our custom was to have Mother read its stories to us as we sat around the fireside.

Tribute should here be made to my mother for her share in building the family home. She possessed the true pioneer spirit and the courage and fortitude to carry on against difficulties and hardships. Besides giving birth to seven children under crude conditions and having to assume most of the work of rearing them, she shared in other responsibilities of the farm home. She was especially adept in caring for the sick in the home and among the neighbors. I recall arising in the morning often to find Mother away, that some neighbor had called for her in the night to nurse a sick person.

Largely due to his four years service in the Civil War, my father was physically handicapped in later years. At the turn of the century, he and Mother decided to dispose of the farm and take life a little easier. The farm was placed on sale and purchased by Mr. M. N. Munson to whom it was deeded on March 1, 1900.

I readily recall the day. I accompanied Father and Mother to Milford where we met Mr. Munson in a bank. It was a sad moment, especially for Mother. Since the property was in her name, she had to sign the deed of transfer. Having in mind the many happy days spent on the farm and realizing an epoch in her life had come to an end, she signed it tearfully—one of the few times I saw my mother weep.

An auction sale to dispose of the stock and farm equipment was held a few weeks later. Father purchased a house in Spirit Lake to which the family moved shortly thereafter. My father died July 17, 1918, and my mother Jan. 8, 1925. They served well their day and generation.

The Mormon Trail Foundation

The Mormon Pioneer Trail Foundation was organized in 1969 as a non-profit corporation in the State of Iowa. With headquarters in Des Moines, the new organization plans to coordinate efforts of many local groups in locating and preserving the Mormon Trails which crossed Iowa in the mid-1840s.

A symbol featuring the famous Brigham Young Buffalo Skull has been developed for nationwide use. Local Mormon Trail enthusiasts will be granted permission to use the symbol when the Foundation determines standards of historical accuracy have been met. It is expected the symbol will be used to mark the main route of the Mormons through Southern Iowa, the Handcart Trail from Iowa City to Salt Lake City and the Mormon Battalion Trail from Mt. Pisgah (Union county) to San Diego, Calif.

A study is now underway in the U. S. Department of Interior to determine if the Mormon Pioneer Trail should be declared a national landmark and included in the National Trails System. This interest by the Interior Department reflects mounting interest in the trail and the Mormon exodus among many local citizens groups.

Anyone with information about the various routes of the Mormons through Iowa is invited to share that information with the Foundation by writing to Booth Wallentine, 521 31st Street, West Des Moines, Iowa 50265.

From *The Chickasaw County Times*, April 9, 1875:

A writer says that a woman with a hazel eye never elopes from her husband, never chats scandal, never sacrifices her husband's comfort to her own, never finds fault, never talks too much or too little, and always is an entertaining, intelligent, agreeable and lovely creature. The grey is the sign of shrewdness and talent. Great thinkers and captains have it. In women it indicates a better head than heart. The dark hazel is noble in significance as in its beauty. The blue eye, is admirable but may be feeble. The black eye, take care! Look out for the wife with the black eye! Such can be seen almost daily at the Police Office, generally with complaints against the husband for assault and battery.