

THE OLD PRAIRIE SLOUGH.

BY CHARLES ALDRICH.

Among the characteristic landmarks of old Iowa which are now becoming obsolete, the prairie slough was one of the most conspicuous and the most necessary to be reckoned with. During the springs and summers of long ago one heard a great deal about them. They were the terror of travelers, for in those days we had no railroads, and the Western Stage Company was often compelled by the bottomless condition of the roads to abandon their coaches and use common lumber wagons instead. A long and strong rope was often indispensable, both with the coaches and lumber wagons. It was tied to the tongue of the vehicle which had been "sloughed down," and the teams were placed out on solid ground where they could pull their very utmost. It was sometimes necessary to pry up the wheels, and it came to be a saying that the traveler must carry with him a fence rail in order to do his part in the business. In some extreme cases he had literally to "work his passage." When I came into Iowa in 1857 the railroad extended west of Dubuque only thirty miles. From there on we journeyed in a lumber wagon, in which we carried our few household belongings, and the type, cases and stands for a small, old-fashioned printing office. Very fortunately my wife and sister rode in a buggy. The No. 3 Washington hand press was wagoned through later. Our route was close to the present track of the Illinois Central Railroad. We had several times to unload our lumber wagon and carry our freight across by hand. In the outskirts of the village of Independence we saw a wagon with a much lighter load than ours stuck fast in the center of a wide slough. How the poor man and team were extricated from this forlorn place we never knew, for they were too far out in the mud and water for us to attempt to reach them. The sloughs were very plenty on this long road of

150 miles, and we often had to use all our skill to get through or around them.

Hon. L. S. Coffin, the well-known Iowan who has made his name illustrious through his beneficent labors in behalf of railroad employes—a reform of which he was the sole originator—migrated into Webster county from the south. He had a heavily loaded wagon, in which the members of his family were also riding, and when he attempted to cross—near the site of the present village of Stratford, Hamilton county—one of those wide, deep sloughs through which, if you went one way you would likely wish you had gone another, his wagon stuck fast. His team could not move an inch and he was in much perplexity, for that wide stretch of country as far as eye could reach was without a house! But leaving things as they were, he started out on foot to see if he could find any one to help him. He soon descried a man with two or three yokes of oxen—a “breaking team”—a couple of miles away. On reaching him he found a ready helper who started at once with his teams to get him out of his trouble. On reaching the spot this was readily accomplished. Mr. Coffin was very grateful and wanted to pay the rough looking young man for what he had done. But the latter refused to take anything. Mr. Coffin tried to force upon him a \$5.00 bill. But the man was incorrigible. Mr. C. next bethought him of a bottle of whisky which had luckily been brought along to be handy in case of “snake-bites,” but the prairie-breaker was equally set against taking a drop of whisky! Mr. Coffin, who was possibly less an advocate of prohibition than he afterwards became, scarcely knew what to make of a frontiersman who would neither take pay for so good a job nor indulge in “a pull” at the whisky bottle! That event occurred some forty-seven years ago. Mr. Coffin “still lives” on his farm near Fort Dodge, and John N. Maxwell, who helped him out of the slough, also resides on his farm a few miles southeast of Webster City. Mr. Maxwell, who was one of the heroes of the Spirit

Lake Expedition and of the great Civil War, is yet a practical temperance man, "peart and chipper," as I once heard Walt Whitman describe himself, hale and hearty, at the threshold of old age.

The prairie slough was always an interesting object and a wonder to me. In the winter it would be frozen solid—as cold and dead as an iceberg. Some of the larger ones, however, would be studded with muskrat houses, huge piles of coarse weeds and mosses, which the animals tore up from the bottoms of the sloughs. These creatures wintered in their houses safe from everything except the spears of the Musquakie Indians. But in the summers the prairie sloughs were fairly alive—and with a variety of life. Several species of small mollusks—coiled shells—the names of which the reader may find in any elementary book of conchology, if he is curious about such matters—had lived and died in our prairie sloughs for countless ages. The winds drifted the bleached and empty shells ashore, where they often looked like piles of small white gravel. Several species of birds nested in the weeds and coarse grasses which grew out in the water. Yellow-headed blackbirds were the most conspicuous. They were about the size of the purple grackle (crow blackbird) which often comes nowadays into our cities and towns to build its nests and rear its young in the shade trees. The head and neck almost to the shoulders were a bright yellow and glistened like polished gold. They were very beautiful birds, but their notes were terribly harsh—as distressing as the filing of a saw. The beautiful red-wings also made their homes in the sloughs, as did the marsh wrens. They ingeniously wove together several stalks of coarse grass and made themselves strong nests—safe from predatory wolves and foxes. In point of numbers the red-wings far surpassed the others, breeding every summer by millions in our prairie sloughs. The nests of the marsh wrens were marvels of ingenuity. When minks were plenty, they also had their abodes in and about the sloughs. Ducks, geese and

cranes summered in these damp regions, often appropriating the muskrat houses for their nests. And there were mosquitos beyond any computation. They simply swarmed in clouds.

Myriads of beautiful dragon-flies—"devil's darning needles"—were also evolved in these prairie sloughs. The young dragon-fly, in the first stage in which it would interest a common observer, was an ill-looking, scraggy, rough water bug. But it presently grew tired of living under water, and on a warm, sunshiny day, crawled up one of the weed-stalks. Finding a fit place for ridding itself of its old clothes, it sat down to wait. After a while as it dried off in the sun, the back of the head cracked open and a new head, shining like a diamond, was slowly protruded. Its back also soon split open and the new creature slowly came forth with a little bundle compactly rolled up on the middle segment of its body. As the sun continued to warm the insect the bundle unfolded, stretching out into gauzy wings. If, at this juncture, you frightened it, the smart young dragon-fly promptly flew away. Its birth and education were things of its brief past and it was "ready for business"—keen to enjoy all the pleasures of its short existence. The old shell closed up as the new insect left it, and remained a dry, gray husk, clinging by the stiffened limbs to the support selected for this curious transformation scene.

No two prairie sloughs were alike. We had ponds or lakelets, where the water was open, in rare instances abounding with fish—and others, where the surface was covered with dense growths of bulrushes and coarse grasses, which looked black when seen from a little distance. One could go around such places dry shod. Little valleys with but gradual descent, down which the water slowly crept through the grass roots and the black ooze, were also called sloughs, as were wide reaches of swamp lands. These last were the teamsters' and travelers' terror, for it was impossible to go around them. In the spring and in rainy seasons they be-

came almost impassable, and when a wagon stuck fast the horses or oxen had a wonderful penchant for lying down, no doubt in great discouragement—and there you were!

In July, 1859, I made a journey to Spirit Lake. Cyrus C. Carpenter—years afterwards one of our distinguished governors—was easily persuaded to go with me and show me the way, which was scarcely more for many a weary mile than a dim trail. He was familiar with every mile of the journey and I was not. The weather was so extremely warm that my horse gave out on the treeless, houseless, 25-mile prairie between the Des Moines river and the lake, and we had to stop on the road until the sun went down, and travel until 1 a. m. to reach our destination. While resting on the ground in the shade of the buggy we became very thirsty. Finally, Carpenter, pointing southwest, asked me, "Do you see that patch of black grass?" I saw it plainly though it was half a mile distant. "There," he remarked, "is plenty of water, and I will go and get some." After long plodding through the long prairie grass he returned with half a pail of water. It contained fragments of decaying bulrushes, and was doubtless alive with animalcula, but in my terrible thirst I never tasted anything more refreshing. The grass was black—dark green—because it grew tall and rank in the mud and water. Carpenter had learned all about "black grass" in his work as government surveyor.

The prairie slough also entered into our local politics—in this way: we had somebody running for office every year, much as we do nowadays. One of "the claims" that some of these patriots used to set up was, that they had "waded sloughs" in the interests of pioneer settlers! I remember stating editorially in reply to one of these "claims," that undoubtedly in coming time monuments would be set up to mark places where some of these illustrious men had entered the sloughs and where they came out on the farther sides. I had my own experience in the sloughs, and can recall many instances in which my buggy stuck fast, the

horses fell down, and I had to jump into the water—and be very quick about it, too—and loosen the harness to save the poor beasts from drowning.

Among the precious schemes adopted by ambitious people for draining sloughs, I recall one which was in the highest degree unique—far ahead of any ever devised by the late Col. George E. Waring, Jr., our great American authority in that field of usefulness. These drainage “experts” were reported to have “invented” this plan: A large ditching-plow was drawn by means of long ropes and several yokes of oxen, *across* the shallow enclosed ponds, from one side to the other, simply making a large furrow, but providing no outlet whatever! This was termed “draining the swamp lands!” It used to be asserted in those early days that some of these thrifty operators occasionally found county authorities along the frontier weak enough, or dishonest enough, to grind out warrants and pay for such work! And thus they doubtless “made money.”

But what changes have been wrought! The prairie slough is almost as much a thing of the past as the deer or the buffalo. Tile drainage and the obvious changes in our climate have made dry land of their beds, and many species of animals and birds which once dwelt in them have entirely disappeared. Even the large aquatic and wading birds no longer pass this way, or come and go in very diminished numbers. Some species may also be very near extinction. Cultivated fields occupy the places where the little lakes and ponds shimmered in silvery brightness forty years ago.

DEATH OF A REVOLUTIONARY SOLDIER.—Timothy Brown, a revolutionary soldier, died in Washington county, in this State, on the 3d instant, at the advanced age of ninety-two. He was in the army at the surrender of Lord Cornwallis. —*Western American, Keosauqua, Iowa, Jan. 17, 1852.*

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