

## PEN SKETCHES OF THE BIG WOODS

The early settlers of Iowa found considerable timber fringing the principal rivers and creeks, but there were few large areas of woodland. One tract of timber, known as the "Big Woods", was located in the southern part of Bremer County, Iowa, extending southeastward from Waverly to Jefferson City—now Denver. The eastern edge was three miles wide. A mile west of Denver the woods were nearly four miles in width. Five miles west of Denver the timber extended across the Red Cedar River and two arms spread out like a letter Y. The northern arm extended to Waverly, and the southern arm nearly to Janesville.

This tract of timber included more than twenty-six sections of land. Some were only partially covered with trees, but on more than thirteen sections the trees stood close together.

In the Big Woods were splendid trees of all kinds—hard maple, black walnut, butternut, white oak, elm, ash, basswood, poplar, dogwood, ironwood, and many others. Some one has left a record which indicates the size of some of these trees. A large white oak tree was cut down in the Wapsie bottom, near Tripoli. "Moses Clark and his son", says the chronicler, "worked up the tree, in part, a White Oak, and made 100 rails, 10 ft. long and 800 stakes 8 ft. long. Some of these rails and stakes made more than 20 years ago can be seen on the premises of M. F. Gillett at this time (1875)."

No wonder the settlers on the windswept prairie were desirous of securing a few acres of this fine timber for firewood and lumber. Nor is it strange that an acre of wood-

land was ordinarily worth from five to twenty times as much as an acre of prairie.

A map of the region, published by the county surveyor of Bremer County in 1875, shows that each section of prairie was divided into from four to eight holdings, while sections covered by the Big Woods were divided into much smaller holdings, averaging about forty-six to the section. In some of the densest timber there were as many as sixty-three owners in a single square mile.

The first white settler to locate near the Big Woods was Charles McCafferee, a young man who came in the spring of 1845. He located in Section 34, Jefferson Township, on land that in after years became known as the "Stears" farm. In the fall of that year his mother and his brother, Isaac, came from Scott County to join him. Other families followed. Among the new settlers was a young woman named Cyrinthia Messinger and in 1848 Charles McCafferee and Cyrinthia Messinger drove across the prairie, fording creeks and rivers on their way, to Independence thirty miles away where they were married.

Section thirty-four, however, was not all occupied by 1853, for in that year William Briden came from Michigan to secure some land for a home. An account of the pilgrimage to the Big Woods was prepared by William Briden's daughter, Mrs. Geo. Sevison, who now resides at Janesville, and additional information was given the writer by a son, Henry Briden, who at the time this was written was living in Janesville, still hale and hearty at the age of ninety.

The story of the journey of the Briden family from Michigan to Iowa has in it thrilling adventure and dramatic interest equal to any of the stories told by other persons who travelled to Iowa by the covered wagon. They started from Michigan in June, 1854, Mrs. Briden driving a span

of horses to a light wagon. The oldest son, Horseman, sixteen years old, drove six oxen to a wagon, four of these oxen being yoked for the first time. The second son, Henry, fourteen years of age, rode a young horse and helped his father, mounted on another horse, drive the live stock consisting of 80 head of cattle and 300 sheep. They lost some of the sheep at Dubuque when they fell into the open lead mines there. Henry says that because he was the smallest he was let down into some of these mines by a rope around his waist to rescue the living and bring out the dead sheep, for their hides were valuable.

They had tents and camped out most of the way, being five weeks on the road and having travelled 500 miles. The road distance is much less than that now but it should be remembered that when the Briden family made the journey there were long detours about timber, sloughs, and in search of fords across the streams. On the way they met some men who asked them where they were going and they replied "to the south side of the 'Big Woods' in central Iowa". They then said, "We wouldn't go there; there's nothing there but grass". Mr. Briden said, "that is just what I am looking for as I have everything else". They reached Buffalo Creek, near Independence, Iowa, on the 4th of July and the eldest son tied his clothes to the top of his head and swam the creek to get to Independence to get himself and his brother some firecrackers. A flag made of a red bandanna was raised to celebrate the occasion.

The family reached the sunny side of the "Big Woods" on the 7th day of July, 1854, where they found two log cabins waiting to be occupied. It was eighteen miles across the country to Camp Creek where the nearest house to the southeastward was located and twelve miles from this house to Independence. Merchandise had to be hauled from Dubuque and when the roads were bad it sometimes took

as many as thirteen ox teams to a load. Emigrants coming through would often help with three yoke of oxen. Everyone helped each other in those days. Swamps and marshes were crossed with great exertion and fatigue; rivers were forded with difficulty and danger; nights were passed on the open prairie with the sod for a couch and the heavens for a roof shelter. Long weary days and weeks of travel were endured, but finally the "Promised Land" was reached.

All told, William Briden's land — prairie and timber — totalled 1440 acres. In later years some of this land was transferred to his sons, Horseman and Henry, in whose names it is shown on the old map of 1875. The Bridens had a fine sugar camp, too, but of that we will speak later.

The settlers on the "Sunny Side" of the Big Woods were a fine, God fearing body of people. Their character was well delineated in the following words by E. J. Messinger, who was one of them over 70 years ago:

Up to this date we have lived in peace and harmony, without law officers, doctors or preachers. We had now been here five years, living almost as members of one family. To say this was the happiest period of my life will not be stating the thing in too strong terms; every man was treated as a brother whether stranger or friend.

It was natural that such people would early seek church accommodations and privileges. The Methodists predominated and the first sermon preached in that vicinity was by a Methodist minister. The people met in various homes for church services at first and there were services under the trees, too. In the early sixties a church was built just to the east of Section 34 and across the county line in Black Hawk County. This church was known as the East Janesville Church. Janesville, five miles west, had become a church center, having three churches for a population of

three hundred. It soon attracted some of the early settlers from the wooded and prairie districts, among them Wm. Briden. He could not be induced to locate on a village lot after living on a tract of 1440 acres, and he selected 20 acres on the east edge of Janesville where he built a fine country home. The house still stands and is in splendid preservation. It is now the home of Mr. and Mrs. Geo. Sevison.

Wm. Briden's sons, Horseman and Henry, remained on Section 34 and with their neighbors were ever active in the support of any undertaking for the betterment and comfort of the community, including East Janesville Church. Of the fine families living in that countryside and on the prairie nearby, the writer can best recall the four Briden families, the Stears, Sevisons, Fitches, the David Marquis and John Marquis families, the Garton, Aldrich, Kyler, Thompson, Lawrence, Gibbs, Rich, Jacobs, and Hutton families. Doubtless there were others whom the little boy of those long ago days has forgotten.

The East Janesville Church, while the religious center, became the social center also for many meetings. This was natural, for just across the road, in Garton's Grove, there had been many community meetings. I recall one particularly, a Fourth of July celebration in 1867 when my father, attired in a long linen coat, read the Declaration of Independence.

Lora Thompson was a young woman who lived with her parents on the farm across the road from where my father, mother, and I lived from 1863 to 1868. Lora played the organ at church services in the East Janesville Church and for a term or more taught school in a schoolhouse on the edge of the Big Woods just north of the creek beyond the Henry Briden home, where she boarded while teaching school. She remembers much about the Big Woods and has related many of her pleasant experiences there before

she left the locality forty-five years ago to dwell with me as my wife in several Iowa towns, far from the Big Woods.

There was much visiting among these families and it was counted a great treat by a prairie family to be invited to the home of a Big Woods family, for they usually had food delicacies absent from the table of the prairie dweller, such delicacies as plum butter and preserves made from the wild plums, wild blackberry jam, wild grape sauce, stewed crab-apple, crabapple jelly, and maple syrup. I never expect to taste such delicious dishes again as I have been privileged to partake of in the Briden, Fitch, and Marquis homes of that pioneer period.

There were many delights beside those of the table in those pioneer days, pleasures that may seem simple and tame to the young people of today — sleighrides, spelling schools, church sociables, and parties in the various homes. The homes of Horseman and Henry Briden were often open to such gatherings with a fine hospitality never surpassed. An enjoyable evening was assured if we could go to one of these homes in the winter time for a taffy pull, using pure maple syrup for molasses that after pulling was dropped into the snow to cool. I attended my last taffy pull with Lora Thompson and others at Henry Briden's home on December 31, 1882, driving thirteen miles to and thirteen miles from the Big Woods in a two-horse sleigh with the thermometer at 33 below zero.

The Big Woods, however, are now mostly a memory. As the pine forests of northern Minnesota and Wisconsin disappeared down the "Great River" to the hungry mills along its banks, so the "Big Woods" slipped down the long road to Waterloo, the shorter road to Cedar Falls, and just across the road to Waverly. On many winter days, for many winters, the creaking wagons crunched through the snow or the sinuously gliding bobsleds bore countless cords

of wood cut from those grand old trees to these towns, chiefly for fuel, although much hard wood lumber was cut also. Precious black walnut trees were cut into fence materials and firewood.

Saw mills were started on the edge of the Big Woods as early as 1853 and twenty-two years later five steam saw mills were engaged in sawing logs from the Big Woods. Some idea of the value of the timber for lumber may be had when account is taken of the magnitude of the task of setting up a steam saw mill in the "Woods". The following description may be quoted:

A. T. Martin about 1855 located at what is now Tripoli. There he erected the first saw mill hauling the boiler and engine from Dubuque with ox teams over trails without bridges or defined "roads".

In 1857, Wm. Stephenson erected a steam saw mill north of Waverly. Not satisfied with the location he decided to move to the other side of the river (the Red Cedar). Moving a boiler was no small job at any time and 1858 was the "Wet Year". The river was bank full from early Spring till Fall. The water from the river backed up in the slough where the mill stood and rose till it was up to and over the bed plate of the engine. Then Stephenson drained the boiler, sealed all its openings, calked them tightly and tipped the boiler into the water. It floated (even as an iron steamship floats). He towed it 1½ miles down and across the river, set it up and in 1875 it was in good working condition still.

A visitor to this region today would have difficulty in visualizing the Big Woods from the few remaining groves of hard wood, native trees and the fields dotted with decaying tree stumps. But for those who saw them in their original growth and splendor, the Big Woods remain a picture of beauty unsurpassed by any other Iowa landscape and in the memory of their beauty there is woven the story of the pioneers who settled there.

## INDIANS OF THE BIG WOODS

When Charles McCafferey arrived on the "Sunny Side" of the Big Woods in 1845 he found Indians in the woods. They were Winnebagoes, a tribe of Siouan stock, who had been brought from Wisconsin to a narrow strip of land, designated as the Neutral Ground. It was a strip of territory between two other Indian tribes, the Sioux on the northwest and the Sacs and Foxes on the southeast.

At the time of McCafferey's arrival there were probably some 300 Winnebagoes in the "Woods". These Indians were led by three chiefs, one of whom, Winneshiek, was famous enough to have an Iowa county named for him. The other two were Big Wave and Wananokaker (sounds like Wanamaker, big White Chief). This tribe remained in the Big Woods three years after McCafferey came but in 1848 they were officially transferred to a reservation 150 miles north of St. Paul, Minnesota.

It is a well known fact, however, that often when an Indian tribe was transferred from its native range to a reservation, some of the individuals would return to the land of their birth. The Big Woods Indians were no exception to this urge and probably some of them came back. These returning Indians were those, of course, in whom a love for their old home was very strong and in after years they were inclined to hang on, come what might.

There were other tribes of Indians in Iowa at this time, particularly a group of Fox, or Meskwaki Indians, who lived along the Iowa River fifty-five miles south of the Big Woods. There was also a small tribe or part of one that dwelt along the Black Hawk Creek on the west limits of Waterloo, twelve miles from the Big Woods. There were doubtless other Indians dwelling to the north but whether these visited the Big Woods occasionally I do not know but I know that those to the south did.



The Meskwakis would leave their reservation at Tama to hunt or trap along the streams. Thirty years ago I used to see some of them camped along the Skunk River north of Colfax forty miles in an airline from their reservation.

The continual migration of the Indians to and from the Big Woods is thus explained to me. I saw many of these migrations, though but a small part of the whole number. In a single day I have seen as many as sixty Indians go by our cabin on the prairie toward the Big Woods. There were Indians in the Big Woods continuously for many years after the exodus in 1848, and they camped there for months at a time until in the seventies.

Probably the most of this migration occurred in the late fifties and during the sixties. The reason for all this traveling back and forth was not altogether due to the fact that the Indian was a natural rover, but rather because the condition that caused him to be a rover was fast tending toward its climax and bringing him to the "End of the Trail".

Life in the Big Woods before the white men came to its borders must have been ideal from the viewpoint of an Indian. There were deer in the forest in plenty; wild turkeys nested and thrived there; great numbers of prairie chickens lived in the tall grass on the adjacent prairies; wild fowl covered the surface of the Red Cedar that flowed through its borders; and the waters of the river teemed with fish; the otter, mink, and beaver darted through the sedges and afforded a goodly harvest of furs, the Indians' currency of trade; wild honey oozed from many bee trees; and in the openings large numbers of wild plum trees grew, wild blackberry bushes were plentiful, and the wild crab-apple grew almost everywhere.

Imagine that spring day on which McCafferee with his ox teams slowly wound his way around treacherous sloughs and struggled through the creek fords as he pushed on to

the great body of trees to the northwest. He reached it at last, the famous Section 34, that Wm. Briden was to reach nine years later and my father nine years after Mr. Briden. All day an Indian youth, mounted on a pony, had flanked McCafferee, the boy and his pony almost hidden by the tall grass that was described as being "so tall that it was higher, in places, than a man on a horse". When McCafferee reached the edge of the Big Woods he unyoked his oxen and picketed them out for the night. It was then that the Indian boy hurried to his camp back in the timber on the banks of the creek, known in after years as Baskin's Run, that wound its way through the woods. There he hurried to pour out his astonishing story that the "Chemokemon" had come, at last, and was now on the edge of the forest with his "tepee that walked".

The head men of the band had heard tales of the white men, the older ones could recall their coming into Wisconsin. They were hunters who killed much game, more than they required; they were tree choppers who cut away the timber to make "heap big tepee" and pulled the big tree boles away; they burnt the grass off the prairie and ripped it all up; then on the shores of the Great River they had dug great holes in the ground and taken out much "bullet rock" (lead). The Indians had been told that maybe, some day, "Chemokemons" would come to the Big Woods too, chase all the game away, cut down the big trees, and rip up the prairie that was now the home of the red deer and the prairie hen.

But spring after spring had come. The plover and curlew whirled and banked in aerial flight along the creeks; the sand cranes uttered their weird cries at eventide; great flocks of wild fowl darkened the skies; the wild deer darted through the forest; the beaver built and rebuilt their dams; countless flowers decked the prairie with incomparable

beauty; the woods were laden with the burgeoning foliage of springtime; and the air was rich with the exquisite odor of the flowering basswood, surpassing in fragrance the famed orange blossoms of semi-tropic climes.

And so the "Chemokemons" had come, had they?

Well they would see. Maybe this was the only one who would come and one, no matter how different from them, could not do much damage. Alas for the Indians, many white men came after McCafferee, for before the last Indian had left the Woods, some twenty-five years after McCafferee's arrival, there were 13,000 Chemokemons in Bremer County.

The Big Woods and the game vanished steadily. Henry Briden recalls a winter prior to 1860 when the snow was so deep in the woods that the deer could scarcely move about and because of this extremity they were the easy prey of the white hunters who practically exterminated the fine herd that had lived in the Woods. The wild turkeys disappeared, too, as many glittering axes cut great gashes in the forest. The turkeys were followed by the beaver and other smaller fur bearing animals.

Thus gradually and very surely the Indian's shelter was impaired and his sustenance destroyed. But he stayed on in the only home he knew, less able each year to accommodate himself to such a fast changing world for him and, strangest of all to him, while he found it harder each year to get a living his white neighbors were finding it easier. "How come"?

The poor Indian never found the answer. Each year his condition became worse as shortage of food and disease took its toll. During those years the contacts the Indians made with the settlers shaped the opinions that the latter formed of the red man. The Indian was actually a child of nature, no matter how old he was. He was curious, in-

quisitive, and unhampered by any of the conventions that bind white men, and he would enter your premises uninvited and when in extremity would beg for anything he desired and found it difficult to meet denial. Once denied he would return again and again after the desired article.

This was sometimes true even of a white baby, for the Indians were fond of little children. In one of the chronicles of eighty years ago there is this statement: "It was with difficulty that E. J. Messinger and the family could persuade the Indians from keeping their son Zach. T. Messinger as their own. The Indians would get him sometimes and take him off with them."

Probably it was the knowledge of other incidents like this that made my mother so frightened whenever she spied Indians coming, and induced her to fly with her little boy to the nearest neighbor.

On one occasion a large number of Indians came around our house and stables near where my father and a neighbor, who could speak the Indians' language, were standing. I don't know how it happened, but all at once I was grabbed and lifted to a pony's back in front of a squaw who dashed off across the prairie toward the Big Woods. The shrieks of my mother and the vehement protests of my father when translated, added to the advice of our interpreter, caused a whistle to be blown and the squaw brought me back. Our neighbor, John Marquis, in explaining the action of the Indians, said that they were only playing a practical joke on a tenderfoot (my father). It would have been no joke in a moment more, for my father reached for his rifle and something serious might have happened. It was no joke to my mother, either, for she was sure that they would have stolen me if they had thought they could have done so.

One day I ran into the house and told my mother the Indians were coming. She did not have time to run to the

neighbor's before the nearest mounted Indian could overtake her so we put our dog outside, barricaded the door, covered the windows, and waited. The Indians pounded on the door, rattled the windows, and yelled that they wanted to come in. They knew we were inside because of the action of our dog who growled furiously whenever they approached the house. He had sense in not attacking so many. Had there been but one or two I believe he would have tried to drive them away. Mr. Marquis, who lived only half a mile away, saw the Indians milling around our cabin, mounted a horse, and started for our home. The Indians saw him coming and at once left us and started to meet him. He turned around and all the Indians followed him home. About a half an hour after we noticed that Mr. Heiser, a lame German settler who lived about a mile south of us, was coming along the trail, carrying a small halter in his hand. When he came to our house he asked my mother in his delightful German brogue, "Didt you seen any Inyuns yet?" My mother said, "Yes, they are all down around the Marquis home now." Then Mr. Heiser said: "Goot I now goes yet and get mine colt. Dem dirty shtealing Inyuns take mine colt when I not see dem do it and after already I tells dem, no dey shouldnt haf der colt."

After a while he came back, limping pulling the colt along after him. "Dem Inyuns dey tell Shon [John Marquis] dey buys dese colt. Shon he says what and how did you pay for dese colt and they shust laugh and say dey goin to pay me some day. Shon he tells me take my colt and go home and dont trade any mit de inyuns, you should watch em."

Other whites who had no individual contacts with these Indians were suspicious of them because of the Spirit Lake Massacre in 1857. But John Marquis, Henry Lampe, and others assured them and us that the Big Woods Indians

were peaceful Foxes and not like the warlike Sioux. Besides they had no leaders like the despicable character, Inkpaduta, the Sioux chief responsible for the Spirit Lake outrage.

All in all the Big Woods Indians made a better exit than many whites would have made under equal handicaps. The pathos of their departure covers up many of their delinquencies and no doubt there are pleasant incidents concerning this race, in the memory of persons now living that will yet be written. The Indians left no trace that they ever lived in the Big Woods save in the memory of the settlers that lived there when they did.

Sometimes now as I look out of the windows of a fine train speeding through the Tama Indian Reservation and notice a few Indians in the woods near the tracks I wonder whether they are really descendants of the Indians who passed our cabin door, or have the Big Woods Indians all vanished at the "End of the Trail"? If so, may their present "happy hunting grounds" be as pleasant as were those in the Big Woods long, long ago.

#### MAPLE SUGAR MAKING IN THE BIG WOODS

To those in the "Promised Land", maple syrup was an ever present table spread for pancakes and bread. It decked the table at every meal and was often an ingredient of cooked food. Although it was an article of commerce of a sort, storekeepers of that day would not exchange other sugar for it, pound for pound, and other goods reluctantly, if at all. This condition was one of the reasons for cutting down the sugar maples: they were worth more in the market for wood than they were for maple syrup.

Maple sugar making, however, was an annual event for the Big Woods settlers. It was the source of many of the delicacies of their tables. Making sugar was a duty, a part

of the farm operation, and, in some instances, a commercial undertaking also. There was pleasure and art in it as well as toil. During the winter the trees to be tapped were located and a fireplace was made for holding the boiling pans. This was located as near as possible to the center of the area of tapped trees. Sap troughs to be set under the maple trees were also cut out in the winter. Taps of hollow wood were fashioned out of alder, pokeberry, or other pithy growths. These taps were inserted into holes bored in the sugar maple tree. The taps were cut away on the top to permit the sap to trickle in and out and drop down in the chopped-out trough.

As soon as the sap started to run in the early spring, there was great and continuous activity about the sugar camp. All other operations were subordinated as much as possible, in order to give attention to the sugar making. Overtime was not thought of except to get more than a day out of each twenty-four hours. For should the weather become warm enough to swell and start the leaf buds, the sap would stop running. Therefore as soon as the sap started the trees were tapped, log troughs were set under the taps, and wood was laid for a fire under the wide shallow pans. Then a steady old horse was hitched to a stone-boat upon which was placed a scoured wash tub or a wash boiler. With this the trip was made from tree to tree and the sap was poured out or dipped out of the trough into the tub. Then the full tubs were taken to the large open pans where the sap was boiled until the proper consistency for maple syrup or sugar was attained, the latter operation requiring more care and skill. This process was known as "sugaring off".

The syrup was tested by dropping some into clear snow from time to time. When it was decided that it was ready to be removed from the pans, it was first run into a re-

ceptacle. It was then strained through muslin cloth and whites of eggs were stirred into the strained syrup, and the clear amber-hued nectar was then bottled or sealed in stone jars for future use.

There was a difference in the amount of sap produced by trees; some bore more sap than others of apparently the same size. There was a difference also in the sugar content of the sap and there was a difference in the seasons, too.

A season was said to be a good sugar season when the sap ran steadily and long and when the winter snowfall in the woods was not too heavy. It was also considered fortunate if a light or "sugar" snow fell during sap boiling just often enough to regulate the sap flow and make the stoneboat slip easily. A hard-dragging boat would start suddenly and stop suddenly causing the load of sap to splash or tip over. And sap was precious and very good to drink as the youngsters found who tagged the old stoneboat through the woods just to get a drink of sap now and then. It was interesting at the sap boiling place, too, but if one stayed there too long he or she might have to carry wood for the fire or run on an errand somewhere, and then the smoke got in your eyes. It was more fun to follow the stoneboat around; sometimes one had a ride on it, and also received a drink out of its precious load.

Many sugar camps were operated in the Big Woods from the fifties to the present time. As we have pointed out, some were operated for private use only, the excess product of other camps was sold, and some were operated principally for commercial purposes.

No known definite record exists of the number of sugar maple trees that were tapped in the Big Woods during a season. Fairly reliable estimates have been made, based on individual experiences, observations, and records of



camps operating there to-day. Only a few weeks ago the writer talked with Henry Briden, of Janesville, now ninety year old. Mr. Briden told me of his sugar trees but said that his brother, Horseman, had more and some seasons tapped four hundred trees.

Ed. L. Jennings, of Cedar Falls, Iowa, with whom I talked on January 4th of this year, told of his father's maple sugar trees. Samuel Jennings located in the Big Woods in Jackson Township, Bremer County, two miles east and half a mile north of Janesville, in 1851. The old map shows that his homestead consisted of 240 acres and that he had 50 acres more in the heart of the Big Woods. The Jennings family has made maple syrup since Ed. L. Jennings can remember and each season now he makes it. His sugar camp, or bush as it is sometimes called, is located northeast of Janesville and consists of 1500 trees. Last year he tapped 600 trees that yielded 200 gallons of maple syrup of 32° gravity sugar test. Mr. Jennings explained that this production was not an average yield, for 1929 was not a good sugar season, since spring advanced too rapidly for sugar making, the sap flowing but a short time.

He states that there are one or more other camps now in the region once known as the Big Woods and I believe it is safe to say that there were at least twenty camps making sugar at one time when most of the sugar trees were tapped. What a yield of sap has flowed from these trees in the past eighty years, hundreds of thousands of gallons in the aggregate. It takes fifty gallons of sap to make a gallon of syrup and a gallon of syrup will make six pounds of sugar. From all this accumulated evidence we can conservatively estimate that the Big Woods has yielded the equivalent of some fifty tons of delicious maple sugar.

CHAS. E. HALL