

## THE PIONEER CABIN <sup>1</sup>

Let us go back to an incident which transpired during the first decade of the twentieth century. The scene: the outskirts of the little village of Hodgenville, Kentucky. The time: February 12, 1909 — the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln. The event: the laying of the cornerstone of the Lincoln Memorial building by President Theodore Roosevelt. Lincoln monuments had been erected in almost every nook and corner of the country, but on this particular occasion something more than the memory of the first martyr President of the United States was being enshrined. This memorial carried with it something more intangible: something symbolic, something mystical, something almost hallowed. It was destined to enshrine and protect from the elements the humble log cabin in which Abraham Lincoln was born.

The beautiful structure which was erected at Hodgenville had come about through the joint efforts of over eighty thousand people, who had raised \$300,000 for the memorial. It was designed by the distinguished architect, John Russell Pope, and was completed in 1911 at a cost of a quarter million dollars. The memorial was of heroic proportions and was executed in somber granite. Its architecture seemed to express the character of the rugged, upright, honest, serious Lincoln himself. Its gray walls suggested a certain sadness that at times was so characteristic of the man; its perfected form and delicate detail mirrored perfectly the nobility and refinement of Lincoln's sensitive

<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally read before the Pottawattamie County Historical Society at the dedication of the pioneer cabin in Sunset Park at Council Bluffs on June 20, 1937. It has since been revised and enlarged to include material from various sections of the State.

soul. Standing atop a noble flight of stairs, the simple-cut block of granite seemed to rise out of the very hills whence Lincoln himself came.<sup>2</sup>

The Lincoln cabin typifies more nearly than any other the home and the possibilities of the average pioneer. So also in the log cabin of the Iowa pioneer we see symbolized many of the elements and characteristics of the frontiersman himself. Cut from the virgin forests that flanked the rivers and streams, the Iowa log cabin represented the youth of the frontier, a youth through which every pioneer community had to pass. Frame buildings, brick and stone dwellings, these were mere exceptions, to be extolled by the passing stranger or the enthusiastic local newspaper. The log cabin was the rule and a true symbol of the Iowa frontier.

What were some of the characteristics expressed by the log cabin? First of all, it was usually rough-hewn — as rough as the pioneer himself. But it had the strength of the pioneer in warding off attack, or in sheltering him from rough weather. To the lonely stranger it represented a friendly haven after he had traveled all day through a dreary wilderness. Here he could be sure the latch string would be always out. No matter how many strangers already occupied the floor, a tired traveler could always find a place to rest and refresh himself.

The pioneer cabin symbolized independence — an independence that had been won from a stern and unrelenting nature. To secure that independence many thousands had given their lives in the American Revolution. The axe and the rifle of the pioneer secured and maintained that inde-

<sup>2</sup> Newcomb's *In the Lincoln Country*, pp. 42-51. Although the Lincoln cabin was humble it was by no means a lean-to shelter as it is so often pictured. There is a strong tradition throughout the country round about Hodgenville that the Lincolns had a "cow and calf, milk and butter, a good feather bed, homespun coverlids", a "loom and wheel" and the other simple accoutrements that made up the household equipment of the day.

pendence. With the pioneer in his covered wagon went his wife, his children, the Bible, the ploughshare, the scythe, the flail, and the other implements of peaceful conquest.

Closely allied with this independence was the spirit of coöperation. A log cabin was seldom the work of one man — after the logs had been prepared, neighbors were called in to help “raise” the new home. The old-fashioned “log-raising” was a real social event on the frontier. A keg or barrel of raw liquor often made hard work light. In this connection it may be noted that the log cabin church of the Methodists of Dubuque was an exception: this historic edifice was raised with a few hands and without spirits of any kind.<sup>3</sup>

When the first pioneers came to Dubuque in 1830 they found the land without government or law of any kind. They knew that some rules would be necessary to protect their cabins and their claims, so on June 17, 1830, they drew up the Miners' Compact — the first set of laws for the government of white men prepared on the soil of Iowa. Later, when Iowa entered the various Territorial stages, and local governments were still not yet well established, the pioneers formed claim associations to insure their farms and log cabins from the claim jumper. And not infrequently rough justice was dealt out by the regulators or vigilantes of early Iowa.<sup>4</sup>

One might continue at great length and with many examples to illustrate how the log cabin is a true symbol of the pioneer spirit. But perhaps a few examples of the many and varied uses of the log cabins in Iowa would illustrate the close affinity between the pioneer and his cabin.

<sup>3</sup> Sharp's *Early Cabins in Iowa* in *The Palimpsest*, Vol. II, pp. 16-29; Swisher's *Claim and Cabin* in *The Palimpsest*, Vol. VIII, pp. 9-13; Gallaher's *The First Church in Iowa* in *The Palimpsest*, Vol. VII, pp. 1-10.

<sup>4</sup> Petersen's *Some Beginnings in Iowa* in *THE IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY AND POLITICS*, Vol. XXVIII, pp. 15-22, 37-41.

Since the first frontier was along the Mississippi, let us begin with the cabins in use along the eastern Iowa border.

The American settlement of Iowa did not legally begin until June 1, 1833, and the log cabins of Julien Dubuque, Basil Giard, and Louis Honoré Tesson (settlers under the Spanish land grants) may be omitted from this discussion. It may be well to point out, however, that the earliest permanent homes (and these were log cabins) were erected in the Half-breed Tract in what is now the southern tip of Lee County, Iowa. The log cabin which Dr. Samuel C. Muir erected in 1820 at Puck-e-she-tuck (Keokuk) no doubt provided a welcome shelter for him and his Indian wife, although a good description of it is unavailable. This cabin must have had the elements of permanence for Isaac R. Campbell moved into it eleven years later.

Early in the spring of 1828 Moses Stillwell moved from Illinois across the Mississippi River into Lee County with his family and occupied one or two cabins that he had built during the previous winter. It is quite probable that Stillwell constructed creditable buildings since he was a carpenter by trade and a steamboat agent only by appointment.<sup>5</sup>

In Lee County another log cabin served as Iowa's first schoolhouse. It was in 1830 that Berryman Jennings crossed the Mississippi from Commerce, Illinois, and taught school for a three-months term at Nashville, Iowa. Berryman Jennings was a Kentuckian, born two years before Abraham Lincoln. The little town of Commerce was later named Nauvoo and its story is familiar, for Nauvoo and Kanesville stood at opposite ends of the Mormon Trail in Iowa.

Let Berryman Jennings describe this first schoolhouse in Iowa: "It was built", Jennings says, "of round logs, or

<sup>5</sup> *The History of Lee County, Iowa* (Western Historical Company, Chicago, 1879), pp. 166, 167, 328-333.

poles, notched close and mudded for comfort, logs cut out for doors and windows, and also for fire-places. The jamb back of the fire-places was of packed dry dirt, the chimney topped out with sticks and mud. This cabin, like all others of that day, was covered with clapboards. This was to economize time and nails, which were scarce and far between. There were no stoves in those days, and the fire-place was used for cooking as well as for comfort.”<sup>6</sup>

A deserted round-log cabin served as the first schoolhouse at Batavia in Jefferson County. In this primitive edifice Elijah O'Bannon taught a three-months subscription school, charging \$2.50 per scholar. A student who attended later declared that the cabin contained no window, and that in order to let in a better supply of light and air, the taller boys would rise up and shove aside the loose clapboards on the roof, and protrude their heads through the aperture, opening their mouths for air like a fly-trap. The wooden-hinged door creaked with a “soul-harrowing howl” whenever it was opened.<sup>7</sup>

In Appanoose County a log building twenty by twenty-four feet in size served as Cincinnati's first schoolhouse. Built of hewn logs in 1852 this “tony” cabin had glass windows and was heated by a stove. The seats and desks were of sawed lumber. It was described as a “gorgeous” structure for that time.<sup>8</sup>

Let us move up the Mississippi to the mineral region

<sup>6</sup> Grahame's *The First School in Iowa* in *The Palimpsest*, Vol. V, pp. 401-407.

<sup>7</sup> *The History of Jefferson County, Iowa* (Western Historical Company, Chicago, 1879), p. 496. The first public school in Plymouth County was taught in December, 1859, at Melbourne, by William Van O'Linda. Melbourne was established as a post office in 1862 and discontinued in 1863.—Freeman's *History of Plymouth County Iowa*, Vol. I, pp. 59, 60; list of post offices in Iowa prepared by N. D. Mereness.

<sup>8</sup> *The History of Appanoose County, Iowa* (Western Historical Company, Chicago, 1878), p. 452.

around Dubuque. Only one pioneer house, known as the Newman cabin, remains as a memorial to frontier days at Dubuque's Mines. It stands in Eagle Point Park at Dubuque. Such names as Hosea T. Camp, Thomas McCraney, and the Langworthy brothers should, however, be remembered as among the first to erect cabins in the lead mining region of Iowa.<sup>9</sup>

At Dubuque a log cabin, twenty by twenty-six feet in size, was erected in 1834 at a cost of \$255, and served as the first church in Iowa. Although built by the Methodists, subscriptions were given by pioneers of many faiths and nationalities. Even negroes who were or had been slaves contributed their "mite" to its erection. This humble cabin sheltered several terms of court under the jurisdiction of Michigan Territory, acted as a schoolhouse, held the meeting to consider the incorporation of the town of Dubuque—in a word functioned as a center of religion, education, and law.<sup>10</sup>

The log cabin church at Dubuque, which also held the first court, was a much finer edifice than that in which District Judge David Irvin presided at Wapello in 1837. This courthouse was constructed of cottonwood logs or poles. "The stand from which Judge Irvin dispensed justice", one authority asserts, "was an ordinary dry-goods box, upon which was a split bottom chair. The grand jury held its sessions in a sort of cave, or hollow, in the river bank, and the petit jury conducted their deliberations a part of the time at least in a movable calf pen."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *The History of Dubuque County, Iowa* (Western Historical Company, Chicago, 1880), p. 344. A picture of the Newman home was printed in the photogravure section of *The Des Moines Register*, December 29, 1929.

<sup>10</sup> Gallaher's *The First Church in Iowa* in *The Palimpsest*, Vol. VII, pp. 1-10. The original subscription list is in the possession of the State Historical Society of Iowa.

<sup>11</sup> Springer's *History of Louisa County Iowa* (S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, Chicago, 1912), Vol. I, p. 79. Such courtroom facilities were not un-

In 1849 and again in 1852, Mormons filtered into Fisher Township in Fremont County. They built the first school at Manti, a log cabin that was used for educational and religious purposes alike.<sup>12</sup> Again and again, in the ninety-nine counties of the State, these scenes were repeated.

The first jails built were log cabins, some of them scarcely escape-proof. Not infrequently settlers contracted with local authorities for the feeding and harboring of prisoners. In 1834 Patrick O'Connor was confined in a log cabin pending the arrival of the date of his execution by hanging. On January 7, 1841, in answer to advertisements by the county clerk, plans and specifications were received from sundry persons in Jefferson County. The county officers thereupon ordered that the jail be built. The following specifications remain to this day. "*Description* — To be built of logs, twenty-four by eighteen feet, double wall; first story with a space between said double walls of seven inches; eighteen feet high; two lower floors to be of square timbers one foot thick; flooring-plank on top of lower floor to be spiked in such manner as to prevent boring through the ceiling for upper story." The contract was let at "public outcry" on February 13th, different parts of the work being awarded to different individuals.<sup>13</sup>

common. When the second term of the district court convened at Waukon in 1853, the court convened in a log cabin measuring about ten feet by fourteen feet. "The building was so small", Judge Dean relates, "that when the jury took a case to make up their verdict, the court, attorneys, and spectators took the outside, and they the inside, until they had agreed. During this court all parties here from abroad found places to eat and sleep as best they could, every log cabin in the vicinity being filled to overflowing." This diminutive cabin was transformed into a blacksmith shop in the fall of the same year but subsequently became a corn crib.— Hancock's *Past and Present of Allamakee County Iowa* (S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, Chicago, 1913), Vol. I, pp. 70, 71.

<sup>12</sup> *History of Fremont County, Iowa* (Iowa Historical Company, Des Moines, 1881), p. 543.

<sup>13</sup> *The History of Jefferson County, Iowa* (Western Historical Company, Chicago, 1879), pp. 404, 405.

The first jail in Mills County was erected in 1853. It was described as a substantial building of hewn logs and heavy planks, made doubly secure by heavy spikes driven in at regular short distances.<sup>14</sup>

The historic cabin of Antoine Le Claire is especially interesting to Iowans. One of the provisions of the treaty which closed the Black Hawk War set aside for Antoine Le Claire the section of land on which the treaty was signed, on the express condition that he build a home thereon. This he did, erecting a pretentious cabin of hewn logs one and one-half stories high with three gables. This preceded the beginnings of the city of Davenport.<sup>15</sup>

During the summer of 1836, Dr. George Peck came to the Black Hawk Purchase and chose what is now Camanche as the site for the future metropolis west of the Mississippi. A lithograph map of this then paper town, called the Osborn, Peck & Armstrong Plat, shows that the original plat contained twenty ranges of twenty blocks each, with eight lots in a block, in all 3200 lots. To this city of "magnificent distances" came Franklin K. Peck in February of 1837. Peck had purchased a lot from his enterprising father. Leaving his team at a cabin, Peck proceeded to the spot where the townsite was described and managed to find the corner stakes, which were all that indicated a city. Peck felled some trees on an island in the Mississippi and built a cabin of hewed logs covered with shakes. This measured eighteen by twenty feet in size, and is said to have served

<sup>14</sup> *History of Mills County, Iowa* (State Historical Company, Des Moines, 1881), pp. 420, 421. At Council Bluffs a huge log house was bought of the Mormons for a courthouse and a smaller building for a jail. The jail was about eighteen feet square, constructed of three-inch planks, doubled so as to break joints, and filled so full of spikes that it would be impossible for a prisoner to saw his way out.—Field and Reed's *History of Pottawattamie County, Iowa* (S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, Chicago, 1907), Vol. I, p. 14.

<sup>15</sup> *History of Scott County, Iowa* (Inter-State Publishing Company, Chicago, 1882), pp. 261, 606-609.

as the first hotel in the county, for Peck served meals and kept a house of entertainment for newly arrived settlers. The building was sold shortly afterwards to Dunning & Munroe of Chicago, who were transporting goods into the county by wagon team from their Chicago store. Peck's cabin then became a store.<sup>16</sup>

One example may be given to illustrate the simplicity, the rough-hewn character, and the sturdy yet friendly nature of a typical Iowa pioneer cabin. I have in mind the cabin of Prosser Whaley who settled in Allamakee County in northeastern Iowa in 1849. Whaley's first home would scarcely win a prize in *Better Homes & Gardens* today. He made this temporary shelter by putting a pole from one tree to another, then setting shorter poles all around it with one end on the ground, the other end resting against the main pole, and covering the whole with hay. In this house the Whaley family lived about six weeks. They cooked their meals at a fire outside, the cooking utensils being a longhandled frying pan, an iron dinner-pot, and a tin bake-oven. The coffee mill was nailed to one of the trees.

Meanwhile Mr. Whaley built a permanent home in the form of a log cabin that measured sixteen by eighteen feet. After moving into their new cabin the hay house was set apart for a stable. "This log house", a contemporary account declares, "was a general stopping place for newcomers until the settlement grew so that other accommodations were provided, and it has sheltered as many as thirty-two persons of a night; on such occasions it was necessary for the men to make their toilet early in the morning before the women were awake, and the women to make theirs after the men had gone out to see what the weather was likely to be for the coming day. Every old settler understands from

<sup>16</sup> *The History of Clinton County, Iowa* (Western Historical Company, Chicago, 1879), p. 568.

personal recollection that "a log cabin is like an omnibus or street car in this, that there is always room inside for one more."<sup>17</sup>

Sometimes the early settler constructed what was known as a three-faced camp, a three-walled home with one side open. Although not a common dwelling, the occasional presence of such camps on the Iowa frontier merits a description. First the walls were built, usually about seven feet high. Then poles were laid across the walls at a distance of about three feet apart. A roof of clapboards was laid across these poles, the clapboards being kept in place by weight poles placed on them. The clapboards were about four feet in length and from eight inches to twelve inches in width, split out of white oak timber. No floor was laid in such a structure, and it required neither door, window, or chimney. The one side left out of the cabin answered all these purposes. In front of the open side was built a large log heap, which served for warmth in cold weather and for cooking purposes in all seasons. Of course there was an abundance of light, and, on either side of the fire, plenty of space to go in and out. Although more easily constructed than the ordinary cabin, the three-faced camp was not common in Iowa and when erected served only as a temporary abode.<sup>18</sup>

Such a makeshift abode was erected by George Key in Louisa County in 1837, pending the arrival of his family. When the family arrived from Indiana after a forty-five day trip overland, they found Mr. Key waiting for them with a real summer home. "It consisted", a local historian asserts, "of a rail pen, three sides built up solid, the other entirely open, the corners held up by rails butting in from

<sup>17</sup> Hancock's *Past and Present of Allamakee County Iowa* (S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, Chicago, 1913), Vol. I, pp. 207, 208.

<sup>18</sup> *History of Butler and Bremer Counties, Iowa* (Union Publishing Company, Springfield, Illinois, 1883), pp. 801-804.

the outside. This was covered with elm bark, put on good and thick and weighted down to hold it in place. It, with the covered wagon, made them a comfortable home until fall by which time Mr. Key had raised a fine crop and built a very fair house, made of framed timbers that had been hewn. This was weatherboarded with clapboards, ceiled with clapboards and roofed with clapboards. This house looked pretty well, but it was terribly cold, and the huge fireplaces were worked to their limit to keep the noses and toes from getting frosted."<sup>19</sup>

Moving westward to what might be called the frontier line of 1850 we find log cabins rising on every hand in central Iowa. William Parker, who was the second pioneer to settle in Story County, built a log cabin in Collins Township in 1848. On June 23, 1876, Parker set down in writing a description of his first home: "In the fall of 1848, I came to Story County and built me a log cabin, size 12 x 14 feet. April 12, 1849, I came to my cabin. It had no opening for door or window. I cut out a door with my axe, so I could carry my goods in, and moved into the pen, without roof or floor, I cut a tree for boards to cover the cabin, took my wagon bed apart to make a floor in my mansion to keep the two little babies off the ground; and, being root hog or die, my better half and I went to work. Some people say it is hard times now. They do not know hard times when they see them. Let them take it rough and tumble as I did, and they may talk. We lived in this hut till the next August, when I put me up what was called a good house in those days. I went 60 miles to mill, took me about a week to make the trip. We had a cast iron mill in the neighborhood that we used to run by hand. We were often glad to get a peck of corn cracked on this mill. Now [1876] I can go to mill

<sup>19</sup> Springer's *History of Louisa County Iowa* (S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, Chicago, 1912), Vol. I, pp. 282-284.

and return in half a day. I have now 230 acres of land, all fenced except 11 acres. Collins Township has improved in proportion."<sup>20</sup>

Just as the log cabin was a symbol in eastern and central Iowa, so too it served as the emblem of the pioneer in western Iowa. During the late forties and early fifties the ax of the industrious squatter rang sharp and clear in what is now Pottawattamie County as he raised his cabin along the Missouri watershed. In Waveland Township all the settlers who traveled over the Mormon Trail are said to have built log cabins with turf roofs. The first cluster of homes in Hardin Township was made up of the thirteen log huts of Mormon immigrants. Council Bluffs grew so rapidly during this period that newcomers sometimes found it impossible to procure log cabin lodgings: in that event it was often necessary to find a temporary shelter for families, household goods, and merchandise in canvas booths. The erection of the first brick building in 1853 was a landmark in Council Bluffs' architectural history.

Along the Missouri slope, as well as along the Mississippi, the log cabin school predominated. The first log schoolhouse erected in Crescent Township, Pottawattamie County, is typical: it had a turf roof and a puncheon floor and door, dressed out with a common adz. The puncheon seats were also fashioned from rough timbers with the same instrument. The turf roof which graced this humble educational center was common in Pottawattamie County. In York Township, for example, the roof of the first schoolhouse was made of rafters of good strong poles covered with layers of fine brush packed so close and thick that it supported a covering of earth about one foot in depth. This particular log cabin measured twelve by fourteen feet

<sup>20</sup> Payne's *History of Story County Iowa* (S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, Chicago, 1911), pp. 30, 31.

and contained two windows. Air-conditioning in its modern sense was unknown. The pioneers of yesteryears found the winter of 1856-1857 so severe it was impossible to maintain a single school in Keg Creek Township that season.

The log cabins served many other purposes in Pottawattamie County. In Layton Township, E. B. Hinckley used his little cabin as a land office. An election was held in the log schoolhouse on the Copeland farm in Rockford Township and settlers from nearby Harrison County voted there. As early as 1847 Ezekiel Downs built a two-story log cabin on Mosquito Creek in Norwalk Township which he used as a flour mill. Dances were held in these rude structures. In Boomer Township the long winter nights were frequently whiled away dancing in Mrs. Mackland's log cabin. Grandparents who shake a disapproving finger at the youth of today may be somewhat abashed to learn that Mrs. Mackland's log cabin fairly shook with the liveliness and zest of those who thus enjoyed themselves.<sup>21</sup>

Untold hardship in a desolate, uninhabited region was a common heritage of the Iowa pioneer. I. D. Blanchard came to Fremont County in 1848 and erected his cabin in Benton Township. "We found a wild country", a member of the party declared, "the tall prairie grass growing around where the house now stands. There was there a log hut covered with shakes and dirt. Not a rod had been turned and not a house in sight. A bevy of wild turkeys had been scratching around the deserted hut — it was a dreary outlook and the howling of the wolves made the night hideous."<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Field and Reed's *History of Pottawattamie County, Iowa* (S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, Chicago, 1907), Vol. I, pp. 4, 185, 200, 203, 213, 228, 244, 246; *History of Pottawattamie County, Iowa* (O. L. Baskin and Company, Chicago, 1883), pp. 89-101, 274, 275, 296.

<sup>22</sup> *History of Fremont County, Iowa* (Iowa Historical Company, Des Moines, 1881), p. 540.

But many pioneers were seeking a home in the western solitude. To Sac County came Otho Williams in the fall of 1853 to stake a claim in the timber near present-day Grant City. Williams and his family were the first white inhabitants of Sac County but during the two succeeding years a number of settlers made their homes near Williams or in the vicinity of Sac City. Williams "complained that 'folks are gitten' too thick 'round yer'", sold his claim, and continued westward toward the setting sun.<sup>23</sup>

In Harrison County the usual size of the first farmhouses scarcely ever exceeded twelve by sixteen feet. This condition existed until the late sixties. Despite their small size these log cabins could hold very large families. During the winter of 1856-1857 L. D. Butler occupied a small one-story cabin fourteen by sixteen feet where Woodbine now stands. Despite the fact that ten or twelve persons usually constituted the Butler family their home frequently sheltered "quite a dozen more" safely stowed away. A diminutive log structure with a bark roof harbored Silas W. Condit, the first settler of Little Sioux Township in 1848. Condit has the honor of plotting the town of Little Sioux in Harrison County. The first district school building in the county was a hewn log structure erected in Magnolia Township in 1853 by John Thompson. The little lumber it contained was hauled by ox team from Reel's mill on Pigeon Creek in Pottawattamie County.<sup>24</sup>

The same story was reenacted in Woodbury County. In the spring of 1855 there were two log cabins where Sioux City now stands. The following year the 150 people there were served by two stores, one in a log-mud hut and the other kept in a tent near the banks of the river. The first

<sup>23</sup> Hart's *History of Sac County Iowa* (B. F. Bowen and Company, Indianapolis, 1914), p. 53.

<sup>24</sup> Hunt and Clark's *History of Harrison County Iowa* (B. F. Bowen and Company, Indianapolis, 1915), pp. 68, 74, 75, 82, 83.

county officers had their offices in the rude log houses in which they lived.<sup>25</sup>

When W. E. Rose arrived in Cherokee County in 1869 he found Marcus Township teeming with deer, elk, and prairie wolves. A native of New York and a veteran of the Civil War, Rose settled in eastern Iowa for a year but struck out for western Iowa determined to "plow out from the tough sod of a raw prairie a home for himself." He staked out an eighty acre homestead and purchased in addition another eighty acres. Then he built of boards a rude cabin about a dozen feet square and provided with doors and windows. Since he was a man of some means he hired three men to break fifteen acres of land for him. They in turn needed the money to pay for their own homesteads.

Rose went back east but returned to find that his building had been removed. He began searching for it, a neighbor offering to assist in the hunt. It turned out that the very man who was thus zealous to assist was the house-thief, having concealed the doors and windows under his bed and the lumber under a haystack. He was also one of the three men who had been hired by Rose to do the breaking. The riddle of the house that disappeared was not solved until the three men had left the county.

The first white shelter in Cherokee County was a log structure, twelve by twenty, one and one-half stories high, erected by the Milford Emigration Company in 1856. It was long known as the Cherokee House and stood a little south of the present city of Cherokee. During the Indian trouble of 1862 a blockhouse and stockade were erected south of present-day Cherokee. The blockhouse was twenty foot square built of 8 x 10 logs. During the year 1867 Fred Huxford furnished the means with which John L. Foskett

<sup>25</sup> *History of the Counties of Woodbury and Plymouth, Iowa* (A. Warner and Company, Chicago, 1890), pp. 60, 63, 75.

conducted the first store where merchandise was sold in Cherokee County.<sup>26</sup>

One should not overlook the sod houses and dugouts which were common in the treeless area of western Iowa. These crude but practical domiciles were erected chiefly along the Missouri slope although settlers in central and eastern counties are known to have built them. The sod house was usually erected by those settlers who, finding that all the desirable claims had been taken along the heavily wooded streams, were forced to push out on the prairie. Most of these pioneers were poor and could not afford to buy the lumber to build their own homes, so they built sod houses or dugouts.

The sod house was much more easily erected than the log cabin. The pioneer simply took his breaking plow into the lowlands where the sod was heavy and plowed a furrow about sixteen to eighteen inches in width. He then cut this heavy layer into sections eighteen to twenty inches long and laid them up like brick. Sod houses usually had board floors but this depended entirely upon the wealth or energy of the builder. The roof was usually made of rafters, covered with prairie hay or grass and covered again with sod. This made a fairly tight roof that would last several years. Usually the structure had one door and one window. Sod houses were snug and warm; water did not freeze in them in the coldest weather.<sup>27</sup>

No small number of the pioneers of Pottawattamie County were forced to resort to the sod house because of the dearth of timber. Thus, the settlers of Pleasant Township found the area treeless and the first school was accord-

<sup>26</sup> *Biographical History of Cherokee County, Iowa* (W. S. Dunbar and Company, Chicago, 1889), pp. 315-317, 351.

<sup>27</sup> *History of Butler and Bremer Counties, Iowa* (Union Publishing Company, Springfield, Illinois, 1883), pp. 801-804; *Freeman's History of Plymouth County Iowa* (B. F. Bowen and Company, Indianapolis, 1917), Vol. I, p. 188.

ingly taught in a hay shed. The scarcity of timber, combined with his own slender means, forced Adam Heageny, who hailed from Erie County, Pennsylvania, to content himself with a dugout when he arrived in Boomer Township. A contemporary description describes this dugout as a "large, roomy cave in the hillside. It was warmly banked up, and inclosed in front, and was as comfortable as the most costly palace when the wild winter winds whistled across the prairie. Here he lived for many years, and reared a large family, and it was not until these had reached manhood and womanhood that he bethought himself of any other abode."

The first residence of G. A. Slocum in Pottawattamie County, Belknap Township, was a "dugout" made by digging into the earth about three feet, and for a space of sixteen by thirty feet. Rafters were then raised from the banks of the excavation to a ridge-pole, elevated twelve feet from the groundfloor above the center. The whole was roofed with sod or turf dug from the prairie. The end walls, or gables, were constructed of the same material, piled up like brick laid in a wall. This kind of structure, although not of the neatest externally, was warm and comfortable and sheltered the new settlers from the bleak winds of winter. The floor was laid with common boards and the chimney built of turf. A way was cut in the bank and a flight of steps descended from the prairie surface to the level of the floor. In this primitive dwelling the first white child was born in Belknap Township.<sup>28</sup>

Some idea of the rude simplicity of the dugout may be gained by studying the cost of digging and building a fourteen foot square dugout across the Missouri River in Nebraska. Elder Oscar Babcock, a Seventh-day Baptist min-

<sup>28</sup> *History of Pottawattamie County, Iowa* (O. L. Baskin and Company, Chicago, 1883), pp. 256-258, 275, 317, 318.

ister of North Loup, Nebraska, itemized the cost in 1872 as follows: <sup>29</sup>

One window (8x10 glass) . . . . .	\$1.25
18 feet of lumber for front door . . . . .	.54
Latch and hanging (no lock) . . . . .	.50
Length of pipe to go through roof . . . . .	.30
3 lbs. nails to make door, etc. . . . .	.19½

Total      \$2.78½

When Patrick Carroll came to O'Brien County in 1870 he built a dugout on the very outpost of the American frontier. Two years later Mrs. C. V. Van Epps came to O'Brien County, alighting at a shanty depot in Cherokee County bearing the name Marcus. Here her husband met her in a prairie schooner and drove her twenty-two miles to their 160-acre claim in Carroll Township. In all that journey they saw no home save the Amos Sutter and Harley Day ranch house, which was merely a dugout.

“When we think of those dugouts or shacks now, it is hard to realize how one lived. There was a hole dug down three feet or more in the ground and then a frame of whatever you could get made over that and sometimes only the sod (which was very tough) cut in squares and built up. There were no floors, or partitions, unless made of bed quilts. The writer has stood on six inches of snow in one of these dugouts and done washing for the sick who owned it. But I can not help but say there was more general happiness to be found in some of these shacks than was found in their more pretentious homes afterward, when so many began to feel, and showed it, that ‘I have a better home now than you have.’ ”

Mr. Van Epps had hauled the lumber for their new home from Cherokee and when his wife arrived on September 12,

<sup>29</sup> Dick's *The Sod House Frontier*, p. 112.

1872, she found that the fourteen by eighteen foot home had been built of twelve foot posts but still had no windows or doors. "Rag carpets", Mrs. Van Epps later wrote, "hung over the openings at night to protect you from the cold air, the house being only sheeted up. The writer helped weather board it and what a time we did have to make a stairway so as not to have to climb a ladder. We lived seventeen years in that home, with few improvements, as happy as any years of our lives. The settlers thought nothing of driving ten or twelve miles in a day to visit or to help each other when work was on hand."<sup>30</sup>

Log cabins and sod houses dotted Cherokee County in early days, before the arrival of the railroad. True a few frame and brick dwellings had been erected prior to this time, material for G. W. F. Sherwin's frame home having been transported from Sioux City by wagon as early as 1858. But such buildings were exceptions and by no means the rule. The coming of railroads ushered in a new era: by January 1, 1871, Cherokee could boast five grocery stores, two hardware stores, two meat shops, three hotels, three lumber yards, one agricultural house, a schoolhouse, three physicians, a harness shop, a wagon shop, two shoe-shops, three blacksmith shops, three law offices, three church societies, three civic societies, and three saloons.

The lumbermen were busy on Iowa's last log cabin and sod house frontier. James Archer sold \$20,000 worth of lumber in the first four months of 1870. During the first eleven months that the firm of Luther & Rice handled lumber they sold 226,000 feet of lumber, 467,000 shingles, 16,000 pounds of building paper, four car-loads of sash and doors, and a carload of nails and hardware. The first six weeks C. E. P. Hobart was engaged in the lumber trade, in

<sup>30</sup> Reminiscences by Mrs. C. V. Van Epps in Peck and Montzheimer's *Past and Present of O'Brien and Osceola Counties, Iowa* (B. F. Bowen and Company, Indianapolis, 1914), Vol. I, pp. 222-224.

the autumn of 1870, he sold 225,000 feet of lumber, 150,000 shingles, 50,000 lath, 106 doors, and 157 windows.

Nor was this change limited to frame dwellings. "George Satterlee, during the past summer, has manufactured 26,000 brick", boasted the *Cherokee Times* of October 10, 1871. "Taking this for a fair sample of what can be done in this line, we may reasonably hope that brick blocks will speedily take the place of our inferior pine structures, which are but so many fire traps."<sup>31</sup>

Few log cabins were as sumptuous as that built by George W. Struble in Buena Vista County. "The house was built of logs, two stories high", Mrs. Jennie M. Farmer recalls. "The lower floor was divided into two rooms, a guest chamber for travelers or visitors and a large and cheerful living room. When it was built Mr. and Mrs. Struble were concerned as it seemed to them rough and uninhabitable, but by constant effort it was made an attractive place, and as it was the most pretentious home in the county it was frequented by all. The county court convened in this living room for five years, and court regularly adjourned to allow Mrs. Struble to set the table and serve a meal cooked in the adjoining kitchen, of which judge, bar and litigants partook with relish. The board of supervisors also met here in this room and the frontier circuit rider held religious services on one Sunday in each month . . . The door was fastened with a huge log chain, and the windows had primitive shutters of walnut, tough and strong enough to withstand a siege."<sup>32</sup>

An early settler in Kossuth County, Michael Riebhoff, staked out a claim in Algona Township and erected his cabin from the trunks of trees he found in a grove. The

<sup>31</sup> *Biographical History of Cherokee County, Iowa* (W. S. Dunbar and Company, Chicago, 1889), pp. 240, 277-280, 353.

<sup>32</sup> Wegerslev and Walpole's *Past and Present of Buena Vista County Iowa* (S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, Chicago, 1909), pp. 56, 57.

cabin was sixteen by eighteen feet in dimensions. Riebhoff made the floor out of puncheons split from basswood logs. The ceiling was so low that a man of ordinary height could scarcely stand upright in the cabin.<sup>33</sup>

The first settlement in Palo Alto County is said to have been made by the Carter and Evans families in May, 1855. They had come from Benton County, Iowa, by ox teams and had staked out permanent claims on the east bank of the Des Moines River near where West Bend is now located. On May 31st five yoke of oxen hitched to a 28-inch plow commenced breaking the sod on the line between the two claims. It was the first prairie sod broken in Palo Alto County. In the days that followed, trees were cut and roughly shaped into logs. A log cabin measuring fourteen by eighteen feet was soon erected. It had no floor and was roofed over with "shakes", three-foot slabs lapped over each other, and held in place by poles placed across above them.

In July, 1856, a group of Irishmen came to Palo Alto County from Kane County, Illinois. They settled about two miles up the Des Moines River from present-day Emmetsburg. They set to work at once, breaking the prairie, erecting rude shelters for their stock, and constructing rough log cabins for their families. The logs for their homes still had the bark on them and the cracks were chinked with mud. "These cabins all had clay floors, and were roofed with 'shakes' or thatched with hay, covered with sod. Most of the cabins had cellars or 'root houses' as they were called, dug on the outside of the house, roofed with logs, and covered over with clay and sod. This 'root

<sup>33</sup> *History of Kossuth and Humboldt Counties, Iowa* (Union Publishing Company, Springfield, Illinois, 1884), p. 371. Riebhoff was born in Hanover, Germany, on June 15, 1807. He emigrated to America in 1833, locating in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, for five years. In 1838 he moved to Iowa, renting a small farm five miles from Dubuque. Two years later he staked out a claim in Dubuque County. In 1856 he moved to Kossuth County.

house' had no outside opening and was entered by steps leading down from inside the cabin. The cabin fire would keep the frost out of the cellar and there was no danger of freezing." <sup>34</sup>

Out on this same frontier of the fifties came John Calligan to Pocahontas County in 1856. Calligan built his cabin of hewn logs taken from the native timber. The roof was constructed of split clapboards covered with dirt and prairie sod. The cabin had a large fireplace in it and on Christmas Eve some logs were rolled in and kept burning all night. "The burning of the Yule log on Christmas Eve was an event of considerable interest in those days since there was little or nothing in the way of variety to attract attention." Calligan occupied this log cabin about seven years and in 1863 built a larger house of hewn logs and sawed lumber. <sup>35</sup>

And so we take leave of the pioneer cabins from whence came such notable Americans as Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, and Andrew Johnson. Many prominent Iowans were also familiar with life in a log cabin. Samuel Jordan Kirkwood, beloved Civil War Governor of Iowa, was born in a two-story log cabin and attended school in a log cabin with oil-paper windows and split log seats and desks. Henry Dodge, and his son Augustus Caesar Dodge, were log cabin pioneers on many frontiers. Later these two men, father and son, served together in the United States Senate: Henry Dodge representing Wisconsin and Augustus Caesar Dodge representing the newly-born State of Iowa. Many other notable Iowans would answer the roll call of log cabin pioneers.

A number of counties already have log cabins in which

<sup>34</sup> McCarty's *History of Palo Alto County Iowa* (Torch Press, Cedar Rapids, 1910), pp. 15, 16, 22-24.

<sup>35</sup> Flickinger's *The Pioneer History of Pocahontas County, Iowa* (The Times Print, Fonda, Iowa, 1904), pp. 157, 158.

are stored historical materials. Every community, large or small, might well erect a log cabin in which may be preserved such pioneer relics as spinning wheels, candle moulds, yokes, and the like, which otherwise might be thrown away. Many of these historic implements have already been lost.

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