AN EARLY NORSE SETTLEMENT IN IOWA

To an immigrant who in the middle fifties of the last century came to northeastern Iowa to build a home and make his living as a farmer the southern part of Howard County and the northern part of Chickasaw County must have looked both desolate and romantic. Hardly a human habitation was in sight. Rolling prairies separated by narrow valleys or extensive lowlands overgrown with tall grass, pathless except for occasional tracks of deer, were the main features of the landscape. At intervals of seven or eight miles creeks or small rivers gave variety, picturesqueness, and a sense of habitability to the land. Running water speaks a language understood by both man and beast; it is the emblem and supporter of life. Early settlers built in its vicinity if suitable farming land was near. Another thing they looked for was timber to supply building material, fuel, windbreaks, and possibly game to eke out their food supply.

In early years there must have been some large birds in these parts, since extinct here, for three of the larger streams bear names suggestive of such birds — Big Turkey, Little Turkey, and Crane Creek; and one that was called Trout Run has since, I believe, fallen to the low estate of "dry run". Some sixty years ago one could hear from a distant unappropriated meadow on a summer morning the loud, melancholy "hoo-hoo, hoo-hoo" of prairie chickens, and at the equinox the rhythmic call of the wild geese as they flew in their open triangle to their next season's home. On summer evenings the whip-poor-will would at times be heard at the edge of a distant wood. At an early snowfall light-gray snow birds would sometimes

be seen near the house. And even a deer might occasionally be seen darting across a field from a forest, frightened no doubt by hunters. These sights and sounds of a by-gone period survive only in the memories of the one-time observers.

Of game animals hunted in those years the most common were prairie chickens, quails, partridges, and rabbits. Fishing was mostly a sport for the younger people, and their catch was usually confined to shiners, bull-heads, and suckers. Fish in the creeks were not abundant, but this fact did not deter the young lads from improvising hooks and snares for their capture. The attempt was relished almost as much as the success thereof. Who has not, as a young fisherman, felt the thrill of the continuous nibbling at the bait, followed by the supreme excitement when the line was pulled down and a fish, small though it might be, was pulled up?

Minks and muskrats were occasionally caught in steel traps set by young lads, who would bring their pelts to a local store and gleefully accept the then current fractional paper money in exchange.

The country roads in those times followed no section lines but wound along the easier levels and crossed streams where the bottom gave some promise of firmness. Bridges came later. Horses being scarce and expensive, steers were trained to carry the yoke and haul a load. They often became quite gentle and submissive. Oxen would sometimes indulge in a runaway when frightened, but they would quiet down sooner than horses. In the "sixties" and "seventies" oxen were used considerably as supplementary draft animals. Even on shopping trips to distant towns some farm women rode in ox-drawn wagons. In transporting wheat to the nearest railway terminal, McGregor, Iowa, on the Mississippi River, which was about sixty miles distant,

oxen as well as horses were used. On these trips, which extended over several days, neighboring farmers would usually go in a body for company and for better protection against possible Indians or other marauders. From this town the grain-haulers brought back lumber and such other heavy merchandise as could not be bought in village stores.

Here is an incident about an unsuccessful attempt to use oxen. One year, in the threshing season, a horse disease broke out, and it was impossible to find in the neighborhood a sufficient number of well horses to finish the threshing. Then oxen were tried, but this turned out to be trying all around. The oxen refused to speed up sufficiently; they simply couldn't see why they should walk faster in a circle than in a straight line. So the threshing had to wait until the horses recovered.

Not much of the first settlers' building material came from the railway terminal. Houses and outbuildings were constructed mostly of oak logs secured from forests of considerable extent along the streams already mentioned. Flooring and material for door and window casings were bought, and usually the shingles. But sometimes shingles were laboriously made by splitting sections of a white-oak log into thin boards and then carefully smoothing these down with a draw-knife. It is doubtful if many farmers possessed planes then. To prevent such shingles from warping too much some people immersed them in boiling water to expel the native sap and then put them under pressure to dry. The writer's mother used to tell how she well-nigh ruined a good wash boiler in this process. But it seems not to have been wasted labor or material, for when about thirty years later the house was removed for erection in another place and the roof cut into sections for that purpose, the shingles, though somewhat warped and worn, were still found to be entirely serviceable.

Farm buildings were also often constructed of logs but usually of more slender and less carefully chosen tree trunks. The roofs of these were covered with straw overlaid with long, coarse marsh grass, the better to shed the rain water. Sometimes a stable or shelter for cattle or oxen would be improvised with a minimum of technique by erecting a skeleton structure of four stout corner posts overlaid with strong rails and these in turn covered with lighter poles and brushwood. This rude structure would be built near the home set of grain stacks and at threshing time the straw-carrier would dump straw all over it. Entrance to this snug super-surface cave was easily made, and a rough door hung on one of the posts would keep out the wind.

For obvious reasons the early settlers built their houses near the water courses, but some, perhaps for the commanding view thus obtained and the better drainage, built on an upland or even on a knoll, as if actuated by a subconscious feeling that if another Noah's flood should submerge sinners in the valleys, they — the hill-toppers — might have some chance of escape. Early houses were, of course, rather small. The newcomers as yet had small families and three rooms would usually suffice. Furnishings were simple, carpets unknown, and rugs rare. Some of the simpler pieces of furniture, such as kitchen tables, benches, tubs, etc., were homemade. The water supply came from near-by streams or dug wells, each at first with its bucket. When an upland pioneer family had not had the time or facilities for digging or boring a well, they would sometimes provisionally depend on a seep-hole dug in a near-by meadow. This, of course, was not satisfactory and might even involve a risk. My mother had in these days two little boys, the older being about five. One morning while she was doing the housework the boys played

outdoors. After a while the younger, who was a timid lad, came in and quietly repeated something that she did not at first catch the drift of. Finally, to her horror, she realized the meaning — Ole had fallen into the seep-hole. She rushed down and found him lying on the edge with his head under water and his hands and arms busily engaged in the effort to lift himself out. His head must have been under water for several minutes. But he recovered readily and lived for about seventy-seven years after this grim experience.

Farming in new settlements about seventy years ago was an arduous occupation for two reasons: mechanical devices to ease the labor were yet few, and as most of the early settlers were newly married, their children were too young to assist much. Seeding was at first done by hand. A painter seeking a suitable subject for the sower, as Millet did in France, might easily have found it on some of the small prairie farms in the new West. The drag and the roller, the least complex farm machines, the farmer, aided by the country blacksmith, could easily provide. Harvesting machinery came more slowly, but necessity spurred invention. The grain cradle was the first harvesting contrivance. Few, if any, tasks on the farm could have been more exhausting on a hot summer day than swinging the heavy grain cradle from early morning till noon and "from noon to dewy eve". The inventors and manufacturers, not all for their own gain, stepped in to ease the labor. The first horse-drawn harvesting machine was the so-called dropper, a rather poor makeshift; then followed the hand-raking reaper; then the self-raking reaper; and after it the "harvester" with three persons aboard the machine and three horses drawing it. This was followed by the self-binder of today.

Most picturesque of these farm machines was perhaps

the McCormick self-raker drawn by three horses, the front one ridden by a boy with a broad-brimmed straw hat, and the broad gaudy-colored rake rising and descending with rhythmic regularity. In fact it constituted an interesting feature in the summer landscape.

Another interesting and also strenuous time in summer was haying. Preceding the mower age the scythe was of course the instrument of grass-cutting, and the hand rake and the fork the means of putting the dry hay into cocks ready for hauling. Women and girls often assisted in this work and seemed to find it rather diverting. The look, the feel, and the scent of new-mown hay is very gratifying, and the season is also one of the finest of the year. We rightly rejoice in the mechanical improvements in aid of agriculture, but some picturesqueness has gone with the simpler processes. The hay-loader, for instance, drawn behind a rack is an unpoetic sight compared with a tall, finely-built load of hay with a man on top waiting for the next big forkful hoisted in mid-air by a broad-hatted man below, while the red evening sun neared the horizon and the family dog sat watching the proceedings.

A neighbor who owned some hay land in a wood a couple of miles from home had three grown girls who, when they joined in some outdoor work, usually went together even if one would have been sufficient. In the haying season they sometimes went with their father to this wood-encircled hayfield. But before going they carefully sharpened their forks, for though usually, it seemed, they were brave enough, they feared a few things — God perhaps vaguely, their parents intermittently, but rattlesnakes most of all.

The corn-planting season was about the middle of May. The field intended for this crop was usually plowed in the spring, then marked and cross-marked with a horse-drawn implement to make suitable depressions into which to drop

the kernels. Young lads with little sacks of corn hung on their shoulders would then pass along a line and drop about four kernels at every cross-mark, and a man with a hoe would follow close upon his heels and cover them. Many a time boys hired out for this purpose and earned fifty cents a day. I can still see the faces pictured on those pieces of paper money.

The threshing season was always an interesting and busy time on the farm, outdoors and indoors. Wheat was then the main crop, and it was interesting to watch the plump, brown kernels pour into the half-bushel measure. At threshing time the women served fresh meat and many extras, and the men contributed stale jokes and neighborhood gossip. The managing threshers — usually three with every outfit — earned good money and had a good time.

Early fences were somewhat picturesque but not always effective in keeping cattle out of a field. But their construction was such that they often protected wild flowers — and weeds. There were two kinds of fences — the so-called rail fence which ran in a straight line and the worm fence which zigzagged. Both were usually built of split black-oak timber with stakes driven into the ground slantwise so as to form a crotch, and directly below these a short crotch was driven in. Then a similar structure was formed about eight feet farther on in the direction in which the fence was to run. A rail was then placed on the lower crotches and two, crossing each other midway, were made to rest their ends on both crotches, upper and lower. Last of all a stout rail or bar was laid horizontally at the top. In this fence no nails were used, the idea being that the top bar by its weight would keep each section firm. But cattle soon find weak spots in a fence. When they have looked it over, they sometimes discover that they have an

itch in neck or shoulder. Then some old bossy will rub on the top rail until it tumbles down. A little further dexterity will make a passage across.

The language commonly used in the homes of these Scandinavian settlers for a generation or more was that of their native land, interspersed with some poor English. But the young people soon picked up the ordinary English from Yankee associates and from instruction in the public schools. Their elders, too, acquired it in a way as a matter of practical utility or necessity. As a rule they read Norwegian newspapers until the end of the century, or somewhat beyond that time. There used to be quite a few of these papers, but only a very few remain. The books, however, which they kept on their small shelves were mostly Norwegian and imported as part of their baggage in their large, handsomely painted wooden chests. The nature of their books was predominantly religious, and the church to which practically all of them belonged was the Lutheran. On Sundays when there was no service in their church — which happened frequently since many a pastor served more than one congregation — the father or some other member of the family would read from a thick volume the Scriptural exposition of the text ordained for that Sunday, after which a hymn was sung. At table, before beginning to eat, a child was often asked to say a memorized prayer, and if he hesitated, he was aided with a word or two of prompting.

The first church in this community was erected in the early sixties and built of logs from the near-by forests. There was no tower and no stained glass in the windows. The seats were made of pine planks supported by oak legs snugly fitted into the planks through auger holes. There were no cushions, of course, and no other invitation to let the attention lapse. There was no organ and no choir, but in

their places the parochial teacher, a stout and pleasant gentleman, acted as precentor ("Klokker"), and step by step the service came to an appropriate conclusion. The sermon lasted about fifty minutes. The minister wore a black gown and the old-style broad, white collar. There was no promiscuous handshaking at the door, as has become rather common usage of late. It may be noted, too, that during the service men and boys sat on one side of the middle aisle, and women and girls on the other. At the exit a collection was taken up to help defray church expenses, but instead of modern collection plates one or two men's hats were sometimes used. Part of the minister's salary was paid in oats and hay to keep his horses, for he needed a team and buggy to enable him to get about among his people and to travel to one or two other congregations belonging to his charge.

The Norse church member took his religion rather seriously, sometimes with heated eagerness discussing questions more suitable for the clergy. In the eighties there arose among the Norwegian Lutherans a controversy over the question of predestination — whether sinful man can in any measure contribute toward his salvation by his faith or whether faith itself is wholly a divine gift. Differences of opinion spread, and to find arguments in support of each view, considerable study of Holy Writ followed, in itself commendable, but not wholly so, since it tended to develop an unkind and controversial spirit. For a time congregations were divided and opposition churches built, but after some thirty years most of the discordant elements agreed to work together again.

The parochial school was commonly held by turns in family homes — only occasionally in a schoolhouse, and the usual season for it was late spring or early fall, when the teacher, who was also a farmer, could most easily get

away. He was a sturdy, sensible, and good-natured man, whom the scholars liked and respected. To announce the opening of the school in a distant district, perhaps five or six miles away, he would send a written slip to some family in that neighborhood announcing the date and place of the first session. This slip would then circulate until all the families of that region had been notified.

The teacher came on foot, carrying in a leather case the necessary supplies, including a ruler for marking unruled paper or castigating possible unruly youngsters. The latter function was carried out but rarely, and then mostly for the minor offense of inattention. Penmanship copybooks were not used, but the teacher wrote in a firm, smooth hand some sentences from a book for the children to copy. A short catechism, an explanatory enlargement of this, and a Bible history were the usual textbooks. Sometimes a reader of lighter matter, such as stories of a moral trend or of adventure, was used. A hymn book was always a part of a pupil's outfit.

As in most schools, the noon play-hour and the companionship on the way or part of the way home was always one of the most pleasing features of school life. A pleasant incident befell the writer two summers ago. On a visit to a point near this community he met the married granddaughter of his esteemed parochial teacher.

In attending the district school in winter in those days, the boys seldom wore overcoats, even on the coldest days. They wore homemade underwear, blouses, and woolen mittens. Even thus fortified, they often suffered in walking across elevated snow-covered fields against a stiff northwester. Sometimes white spots formed on their cheeks, to be carefully treated when they reached home. But memories of early discomforts are greatly mollified by the lapse of time.

Indoor life among these people was usually quite busy, especially among the women. Knitting stockings, mittens, scarfs, garters, and sometimes even undershirts was both an occupation and a pastime with some of them. Elderly women would often bring some light knitting along when they made an afternoon call, in which case the click of the needles would form a pleasing variant to the activity of tongues. They didn't have to watch the knitting much; that was quite familiar, and so, of course, was the accompaniment. Some of the women had brought spinning wheels from Norway and made woolen yarn from the fleece of their sheep. Carding the wool was done either with hand cards or at a woolen mill in a neighboring town. Another home industry naturally followed — the weaving of cloth for the family's clothing. Of course, this required a loom. Fortunately a family in that community owned one made of substantial pine timbers by a competant mechanic. It could easily be set up and taken apart for transport. Cloth of mixed wool and cotton in pleasing stripes of white and blue was made on it, and this wore well, though it was often a bit trying at first to a sensitive skin. Of course, almost all elderly men could mend shoes, and they sometimes made shoes for winter use from untanned cowhide with the fur side turned out, sewing the pieces together with slender strips of leather. Daintily made wooden shoes, for women's use especially, were often brought over from the old country. One farmer was a skillful blacksmith. In a rudely built but well-equipped shop he did repair work for the community — sometimes perhaps to the temporary neglect of his own farm work.

Some trivial work of an amateurish character, uncommon on farms, will just be alluded to. One farmer boy got possession of a small hand printing press intended for card printing and amusement. Not satisfied with such limita-

tions on the "freedom of the press", he ordered some fonts of book type and amused himself by printing some songs and other stuff on a press whose capacity was to cover a surface of about 2½ x 3 inches. Another thing this lad did was somewhat less fantastic: he had observed how another boy at college, whose father had acquired the rudiments of book-binding in Norway, had proceeded to rebind a dilapidated book. So boy No. 1 bought from a local publishing house the necessary materials, made a book press operated with a wrench, constructed out of a broken section of a mower sickle a serviceable paper cutter, got some glue and paste and needle and thread — and there was the rustic book bindery! Some of the books bound there may yet exist.

As is usual among pioneers everywhere, the intelligence level of these people was higher than the cultural. They readily adapted themselves to circumstances but, except in religion, did not ruminate much about things in the abstract. Politics did not, as a rule, engage much of their attention; yet during the Civil War they sent two or three of their young men to fight for the Union. Their reading was confined mostly to religious books, some simple stories, and perhaps a weekly newspaper. Magazines, of which there were few then, did not penetrate into the country. These farmer folk would have been horrified at the large-paged, highly colored trash that passes under the name of magazine in our day. But they believed in higher education and sent some of their young people to colleges and universities. Several of these students later entered the teaching profession and one was elected a member of the State legislature.

Life then was too strenuous for many entertainments, but some there were, especially at weddings and during the Christmas season. Dancing was one of the social diver-

sions, favored by the fact that a fiddler lived not far distant. Manners were sometimes a bit crude. The writer recalls an occasion when some neighbor girls called and his mother brought a plate of cookies to be passed around. The one to whom she offered the plate — a girl perhaps of sixteen — took and retained it. What happened to the other girls, kindly fate has caused to be forgotten. At Christmas home-brewed beer was not uncommon, and an invited or a chance guest was given an opportunity to comment on its quality — which he never failed to do in terms of praise. When drunkenness occasionally occurred among these descendants of the Vikings, it was seldom at the Christmas season, but on meeting would-be friends in some country town, especially after the sale of some produce.

Dress of both women and men was simple and serviceable rather than rich and showy. But even then, among plain people, such a monstrosity as the hoop skirt was not entirely unknown. Elderly women used sunbonnets in summer and bright-colored shawls in the cool seasons. The wooden and the untanned cowhide shoes, mentioned before, were superior for warmth but were used only at home. Girls in those days used no artificial coloring on cheeks or lips, wore simpler and more serviceable headgear and shorter stockings and longer skirts than girls of today, but they did like some glitter and color. Women have always been thus. So they wore necklaces of colored glass beads. Perhaps Eve herself accepted that proffered apple, since so much regretted, partly because of its beautiful color.

Country sports were few, and farmer youth did not need them for exercise. Hunting was practiced to some extent; for skiing the hills were not steep enough or were too small and abrupt, and baseball had not then developed much.

The winter weather in the seventies, as the writer re-

members it, was sometimes extremely severe. Blizzards would blow for a day or two and immense snowdrifts would pile up between house and barn, so that it became exceedingly difficult to make a passageway from one to the other. On some days the cattle could not be turned out and buckets of water had to be carried to them. The plowed fields were scraped by the fierce wind until the snowdrifts looked almost black. Many homesteads were then poorly protected against storms; the cottonwoods and willows, the usual trees planted for windbreaks, had not yet attained a sufficient growth. To add to the hardship of doing the chores, the hay, being stacked outdoors, had to be cut with a hay knife and carried into the stables by the armful. Hogs were usually butchered on the farm and hauled to market in a frozen condition.

Two of the most interesting occasions of the year for the young people were the Fourth of July and the coming of a circus to town. The circus always had something agreeably outlandish about it, with its wild animals and its painted clowns. The Fourth was sometimes celebrated in the country near a store or the local post office. The writer recalls vividly a country celebration to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, not because there was so much to it but because there was so little. No speech-making, no band, and no firing of guns — only the common firecrackers. But there was a parade — a short line of farmers preceded by a man playing an accordion.

There would naturally be a few odd types of character in a community two or three miles wide and six or seven miles long. One was a retired parochial teacher, small of stature and well bewhiskered, who lived on a small farm with his none-too-patiently-enduring wife. He frequently complained to some neighbor friend of having been

swindled by a cattle buyer — of his own nationality, too; and no doubt he sometimes complained to her of other things he had to endure. It was rumored that when both were a little heated she would dash a pan of cold water over him. As to what his reaction was, if any, rumor has kept silent. But it was reported that when in his reading he found passages that especially impressed him he would write on the margin "carefully noted by K. E." (his initials).

Another man, also a retired schoolmaster and since then a good deal of an idler, would sometimes accept a job as a barn painter. But he painted more than had been bargained for. When he had finished his task his entire front was a mass of red; no Indian could have looked so frightfully colored. He was literally "colorful" — to use a recent word.

Exceptions, unless too numerous, tend to fortify the rule. The rule in this case would be that the people of whose life some account has been given here were in general industrious, capable, and of wholesome instincts. As a rule they maintained with one another friendly relations. A few of them came to be large landowners. One man owned sixteen forties and a few owned half that much, the tillable part of which some of them took care of with their own family help. Yet others, through bad luck or faulty management, lost their farms and then moved in "prairie schooners", driving their cattle before them, to points farther west.

In the course of time the scenic aspect of most parts of this settlement has been somewhat modified. The woods have receded, giving place to broader fields, and new buildings have been erected. Every homestead is now sheltered from the winter storms by a grove of planted trees, and wire fences protect the growing grain from herds of sleek

cattle, watered at tanks filled by windmills or by engines, where running water is not available.

On a sunny, windy day in summer, the writer, when a boy, liked to walk up to a point on a hill from which he could see in the distance, across a valley with a stream in it, a ripening field of grain sloping towards him. What pleased him especially in this view was the undulating wind movement in the grain, as if a goddess, attended by a host of nymphs, was flitting swiftly across the field but so lightly that the yielding grain wafted back as soon as their nimble feet were lifted.

For forty-odd years he has not been on that particular spot, but the undulating movement in the grain (if grain is still grown there) no doubt yet goes on. The crops may be different, as well as those who raise them. The early settlers are gone to the Great Beyond and their descendants are widely scattered. But the gently sloping hill, the valley below, and the field beyond are much the same. Materially considered, nature is the more enduring; yet, of course, it is the spirit of man that gives life its significance.

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