

THE PALIMPSEST

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Furrows

The prairie sod of Iowa, as the pioneers found it during the fourth, fifth, and sixth decades, was tough. Like a great blanket, from three to six inches thick, it covered the earth. The hard, closely interlaced fiber of grass and brush roots formed a mat so dense and wiry that a special breaking plow with a low, slim mold-board was required to cut through and turn under the growing vegetation. But when the roots had dried out and the turf had rotted during the winter, what a crop of wheat that prairie sod would produce the following season!

The breaking plow was a ponderous thing with a two-wheeled truck under the heavy oak beam. It required an able-bodied man to handle the big plow. The boss, he was called, walked in the furrow behind and guided the plow by means of two handles which extended out in the rear. Within easy reach was a lever which raised or lowered the front end of the

beam and thus regulated the depth of the furrow. It worked easily when the plow was in motion. The plowshare, or cutting edge, was from twenty-eight to thirty-two inches long, making a furrow of the same width. Extending upward from the forward point of the plowshare was a flat bar of steel about three inches wide and a half inch thick, the top firmly clamped to the beam above and the bottom fastened to the point of the share by a flexible socket joint. The lower front edge of the bar was sharpened to cut the sod — a very important function. This blade could be adjusted according to the width and depth of the furrow. The disk or rolling coulter is modern and belongs to the stirring plow.

For the operation of such a heavy instrument the slow, steady oxen were the best motive power. Horses were too nervous and fast for the work. Four or five yoke of oxen were necessary to pull the big plow through the tough sod. While the boss handled the plow, a boy from eight to twelve years of age was usually selected to drive the team. This boy was not called the "kid". Suggest that and you had some scrap on your hands. With his dog and his double-barrelled shot gun, one barrel loaded with buckshot and the other with just ordinary shot, he would tackle anything from wilcats to rattlesnakes. God-fearing, he would face chain lightning or a blizzard without a tremor. He loved nature and was perfectly familiar with the peculiarities of the weather and the seasons.

The breaking team was organized and paired to the best advantage as to gait, disposition, and efficiency. The leaders, "Tom and Jerry", were young, active, quick to learn, and ready to respond to orders and the lash — mischievous daredevils. Jerry, the "off" ox of the lead team, was taught to get into the furrow and stay there, and this he soon learned to do. If the lash cracked over his back he found escape from its sting in the furrow. The leaders kept the team straightened out and the chains taut. Next behind the leaders were "Duke and Spot", just oxen, well broken, a little heavier than the leaders, perhaps, quick to follow and line up in their places. The third team was composed of "Dick and Stub", lazy and slow. They must be touched with the lash occasionally, not so well broken, but held in line by the others and made to do their part by the energy of the driver. "Star and Boney" were large, dumb, and scrubby shirkers. Here is where the boy learned to pick the green-headed flies off Boney's flank with his lash. This yoke gave the boy an opportunity to practice with the potent words and oaths he heard at the village blacksmith shop and stage barn. If his father was the boss, however, he omitted his special vocabulary and vigorously cut loose with his whip. "Buck and Bright", the yoke next to the beam, were ponderous, slow, steady, and dependable, holding the others in line. Old Bright, the off ox of the team, would get into the furrow and stay there "though the heavens with all its stars come crashing down".

Should the others get in a tangle these wise old lads would hold back and keep things steady until order was restored.

While yoked, old Bright would let you ride him across the sloughs and through the tall grass and brush. He was the leader of the team: he wore the bell at night, keeping the team together while feeding on the prairie, and was first to be yoked in the morning. Old Buck, his mate, was a good old brute. Get old Bright yoked, step back, hold up the other end of the yoke and say to him, "Come under, Buck", and he would step into his place beside his mate and hold his neck under the yoke for the bow, with an air of wisdom almost human.

Buck was the "near" ox of the yoke "on the beam", or "on the tongue". The "near ox" and "off ox", and "nigh side" and "off side" were common expressions in the days of ox teams. From behind, facing in the same direction as the team, the ox nearest your right arm would be the "near" or "nigh" one, the other the "off" ox. A tap with the lash on the flank of the off ox would turn the team to the left, or haw. The lash dropped gently over the head or face of the off ox while the near ox kept moving would turn the team to the right, or gee. The stock of the whip against the faces of both oxen in the rear team, with the exclamation "whoa", would stop the team. The meaning of these words, together with the language of the whip, was soon learned by the oxen. About noon, or toward sun-

down, one "whoa" would bring the team to a standstill with startling promptness. A lash about ten or twelve feet long, made of braided thongs cut out of a tanned woodchuck hide, finished with a buckskin cracker, and fastened to a slender, tapering birch pole about twelve or fourteen feet long made the whip needed to handle the ox teams on a breaking plow.

The boy knew the team and, while the boss cold-hammered the plowshare in the early morning, he would speed away to their feeding haunts to round them up for the daily task. The boy learned to love the prairie, the clouds, the level horizon on which could be seen the smoke from distant prairie fires slowly and gently mounting into the azure sky. In his search for the oxen he came upon bull snakes, caught glimpses of slinking coyotes, heard the distant booming of prairie chickens, and became familiar with the early flowers, — anemones, buttercups, violets, and, where the old grass had not been burned, the fragrant sweet-william. Nature was pure and fresh in those early days. It all entered the boy's memory and became to him a sacred book, full of pictures and poetry — though he would probably have disdained to express what he felt in verse.

The boss was careful to cut a furrow the full width of the plowshare and no more, so that the sod would all be turned under. Woe unto him that "cut and covered". Some there were that cut into the sod farther than the width of the plow, with the result

that a strip of turf was left undisturbed, though covered by the turned sod. Thus for the time the deception was concealed, but soon the green grass would show through, exposing the fraudulent attempt to increase the daily acreage of plowing, and the boss would have trouble getting his pay.

The boy realizes in this day that there are still those who "cut and cover". The rivalry between pretense and reality, deception and truth continues in other forms. Perhaps the temptation to over-capitalize will always be too great for human nature to withstand.

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