Background of a Pioneer

In the northwest corner of Mason Township, Cerro Gordo County, slightly over a mile distant from the corporate limits of Mason City, stands an old stone house built in the year 1866. The location was chosen because of the creek (Willow Creek) and a small grove, then called Crab Apple Grove. The house, now known as the Dent homestead, was built by Amaziah Cannon, maternal grandfather of Louis W. Dent, the owner and occupant at the time this story was written.

Amaziah Cannon of Columbia County, Wisconsin, bought the land on October 13, 1865, and moved onto it the following year. This farm has the unique distinction of having been owned by the same family for more than eighty years and of never having had a mortgage or any other encumbrance against it.

The stone for the walls of this old house came from the river bank near Mason City, probably from the stone quarry near the Decker packing plant. The frame, floors, and partitions are hardwood. The first shingles were basswood. Rough lumber for the house was sawed at Randall's mill which stood near the location of the present

Decker plant, but the finishing lumber was hauled from Waverly. At the time this home was constructed there were but three houses between Clear Lake and Mason City.

The Cannons, who built and occupied this house, were in many ways typical of Iowa pioneers. They had come originally from New York. Cornelia Wait, daughter of Benjamin Wait and granddaughter of Pain Wait, a Revolutionary War soldier who died at the age of one hundred and seven, was born in Madison County, New York, on January 16, 1823, the youngest of thirteen children. In 1842 she married Amaziah Cannon and for thirteen years following their marriage they remained in New York State. The Cannons, with their two children, then moved to Columbia County, Wisconsin, where they purchased a farm and lived for eleven years.

In 1866 the Cannons moved again, this time to the farm in Cerro Gordo County, Iowa, on which the Dent homestead now stands. There Amaziah Cannon died in 1881. His widow, Cornelia Cannon, survived him for forty years. She remained on the old homestead with her daughter and son-in-law, Emeline and Thomas W. Dent, until her death on June 20, 1921, at the age of ninety-eight. Emeline Cannon Dent died on the home farm in 1944, at the age of ninety-six.

Although Mrs. Cannon was an invalid during the latter part of her life and was confined to her home, she had an alert, active mind and was inspired with a desire to improve the conditions in the neighborhood, so in July, 1913, she helped to organize the Clover Leaf Club among the nearby farm women. She presided at the club meetings held every third Tuesday at her home and each time she selected and read a chapter of Scripture. Music and literary numbers formed the programs, and the women brought their sewing. This club was later renamed the Cornelia Cannon Reading Circle. In 1920 she celebrated her ninety-seventh birthday anniversary by having as her guests the members of the Cornelia Cannon Reading Circle.

Because she was an invalid nearly half of her life, Mrs. Cannon was unable to visit Mason City for many years, but she was a member of the Methodist Church and was always deeply interested in its activities. She passed much of her leisure time in making patchwork quilts.

In 1916, Cornelia Cannon, then ninety-three years of age, prepared an autobiography and presented a copy bound in leather to each member of the Clover Leaf Club. This autobiography is of interest because it gives an account of farm life in New York State about 1835 and also because it illustrates the early life of an Iowa pioneer.

"I was born on a farm near the town of Brookfield, Madison County, New York, January 16, 1823. . . . At the age of two years I moved with the family to York Mills. We lived there until I was nine years old, then moved back to the farm and lived there for one year. Then my father sold the farm and moved to the town of Gerry, Chautauqua County, New York, and I lived on the farm when my father and mother died. I was married there and two children were born in Chautauqua County. We lived in the state of New York thirteen years after I was married, then moved to Columbia County, Wisconsin. We bought a farm and lived there eleven years. One child was born there. In 1866 we moved to Cerro Gordo County, Iowa, and located on a farm near Mason City, where I have lived forty-eight years. Two children were married here, my husband and one son died here, three grandchildren were born here and one grandchild married here."

Evidently reading meant a great deal to Mrs. Cannon, for her autobiography continues with the following account:

"The Bible first. I began reading a chapter each morning when fourteen years old and have made it a practice every day since, when able to do so. Have read the Bible through many times. I have taken the Northwestern Christian Advo-

cate for 56 years and have read it every Sunday. Have taken the Christian Herald for 20 years and I save the sermon for my Sunday reading. My favorite author is Ralph Connor. I have eight of his books. Other authors I like are Gene Stratton-Porter and Harold Bell Wright. His 'The Calling of Dan Mathews' is great. My favorite Bible verse is:

"*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.*—JOHN 3:16."

Of her life as a girl in New York, Mrs. Cannon had many recollections.

"There were no stoves of any kind, and no way to heat the house or cook the food, except at an open fireplace. It had a large brick oven at one side, where, on baking days, usually once a week, a bright wood fire was built in the oven and kept burning until the oven was at the right heat. Then all fire, ashes and cinders were raked and swept out, and the bread, pies, cakes, beans, meat and puddings were put in and the door closed. Often bread and beans were left in over night, but cakes, pies, and puddings were taken out as soon as baked enough.

"Aside from the regular baking days, people used a bake kettle. It was large and had an iron

lid and was placed in front of the fireplace and hot coals placed around and on the lid. Or sometimes a johnnycake was placed on a clean board and set before the open fire, where it was soon cooked. Apples, potatoes, onions, were roasted on the stone hearth buried in hot embers, after wrapping in wet paper or cloth. Green corn was roasted by leaving on the husk."

In writing of "Early Farming in Timber Country of New York" and "Farming Tools Eighty Years Ago", Mrs. Cannon said:

"The first thing to be done was to build a home. The house was built of logs, the roof of split timber called shakes. The floor and doors were made about the same way as the roof — of split timbers. The windows were made of oil paper to let in the light. In the place of nails they used wooden pegs. There was no hardware nor glass.

"The furniture was all made at home — tables, stools, bedsteads, shelves, all made by members of the family from poles and split timber. Then followed clearing the land — timber cut down, piled up and burned — clearing the land to make the farm. From forty to sixty acres was about the size of farms then. They could not plow; everything was planted with a hoe among stumps and roots of the trees. They must raise enough to live on while they cleared the land for larger crops.

They could sow small grain and rake it in with a hand rake. Then when it was ripe it was cut with a sickle — a handful of straw held in the hand and cut down and laid in a bunch until there was enough for a bundle. Then it was bound with a straw band.

"When the stumps and roots were dug out the farmers could plow and drag. The teams were oxen. It took many years to make a farm in those days. The tools they had with which to build a house and to make the furniture were an ax, saw, hammer and augur. There was plenty of wild fruit — plums, cherries, strawberries, blackberries, raspberries and wintergreenberries."

Mrs. Cannon describes threshing in pioneer days.

"A hard piece of ground was cleared and the grain laid on it in bundles. Then it was threshed with a flail. This consisted of a long hardwood pole with a short, heavy piece tied to one end. The free end of the longer pole was held in the hands, and the grain was threshed by beating with the flail. The chaff and dust were winnowed out by pouring it from basket to basket and letting the wind blow through it.

"The first horsepower machine I ever saw was a tread-power — one horse tied in a box-like place, which was set on an incline, and his weight,

as he walked, ran the machine. It was many years before they used a sweep-power. When they invented a fanning mill to clean the grain it was a great saving of hard work. The separator did not come until long after. I never saw a separator while I lived in New York.

"About 1850, before we left New York, the cradle was invented. This was used in harvesting grain. It was a hand machine, the grain being cut and laid in bundles ready to bind by hand. In Wisconsin we saw the first horse reaper and years after a machine was made on which two men rode and bound the grain. I have seen a great many changes in farming tools and ways of doing farm work."

Mrs. Cannon tells of Christmas and New Year's celebrations in olden times.

"Christmas eighty years ago was more like the Sabbath day. It was regarded as a sacred day and always kept as such. All unnecessary work was left to later days. Only children were remembered with presents. They always hung up their stockings, but never found toys in them except home made ones. They were filled with plenty of nuts, apples, doughnuts, and cookies. The little folks were just as happy as children are at the present time.

"They had nice Christmas dinners, but every-

thing found on the table was raised on the farm. All fruits, vegetables, maple sugar, honey, and everything made from grains, were to be found on the table. There were no parties or sleigh rides on that day, but there were plenty of them on New Years. On New Years eve there would be a watch meeting and at 12 o'clock the New Year was greeted with songs and bells. The day following was observed more as we celebrate Christmas with parties and rides, roasting apples, popping corn, etc."

Cornelia Cannon also tells about her school experiences.

"The spelling book came first — A, B, C, then the two letters, Ab, Ce, De, and so on. Then came the three letters until I was able to read words. When this was accomplished I read in the testament, then the American reader, and last in the English reader, in which I continued to read while I attended school. I studied grammar, primary and first geography, arithmetic, and writing. A great deal of attention was given to writing and spelling."

Woman's work was never done in pioneer days. There was always sewing or weaving to be finished after the day's cooking, washing, or cleaning was out of the way.

"We never had time for fancy work when I

was young. We had to work hard for a living and to get our clothes. Everything we wore and all our bedding was then hand made. Instead of cotton we had linen. The flax was raised and harvested. When the seed was ripe the flax straw was spread on the grass to cure. Then it was broken to free it from the stalk and left only the flax fibre. The fibre was then drawn through a hackle to straighten it and was then ready to spin. This was done on a flax wheel. From the wheel it was ready to weave into cloth. When made, the cloth was spread on the grass and kept wet to bleach in the sun. It was then ready to make into sheets, pillow cases, underwear, or colored for dresses and aprons. It would wear for years. There were several garments kept in the family that had been worn by all the babies. My mother had thirteen children of which I am the youngest.

"On the farm in olden times everyone kept a flock of sheep to provide winter clothes. In the spring the sheep were taken to a pond or stream and their wool washed, and as soon as dry sheared from the sheep. The wool was sent to the mills to be carded into rolls. It was brought home and spun into yarns on a large spinning wheel. By the way, my old spinning wheel is carefully preserved by a granddaughter, and occupies a place of honor in her home.

"The yarn was woven into cloth on a loom, and the cloth, if for dresses or skirts, or for shirts for men and boys, was colored. If for under clothes or blankets, it was left white. When I was about fourteen years old I had dresses colored and pressed at the factory for nice dresses. It looked very much like ladies' cloth or lightweight broadcloth. One dress was red and one was black, and I had a cloak of green. When I was fourteen I had my first calico aprons. I had two — one white was for 'best'.

"All clothing was made by hand, even men's and boys' suits were home made. The cloth was sent to the factory to be colored, fulled and pressed. A tailoress went around from house to house and made them all by hand. It was four days' work to make a coat, two days to make a pair of pants, and one day to make a vest. All stockings were knit by hand and caps for children and boys, just like the stocking caps of today. Every girl was taught to knit as soon as she was four years old, and helped all they could to make stockings for themselves. All mittens were knit. They were made double for men and boys. There was no other kind to be had. We never sat down with idle hands. There was sewing or knitting, spinning or weaving, ready for the evening or any time when not busy about the house.

"We did not change styles in wearing apparel in those days. The same pattern was used for dresses for years. The skirt of the dress was about two and one-half yards around, cut straight with waist plain and short and straight sleeves. The waist and skirt were sewed together and a string run in to gather and to fit the waist. Little children's dresses were made the same and skirts hung about to the shoe top.

"The cloak was called a mantle. It was cut straight and gathered at the neck, and a cape, reaching over the shoulders, finished the garment. It was made of plain woolen cloth and lined with flannel. Usually children's mantles were of bright colors. Women wore hoods in winter, and a home made bonnet, made of pasteboard and covered with cambric, usually light brown in color, was the head dress in summer. All gloves were handknit. The shoes were made by a traveling shoemaker who went from home to home and made boots for men and boys and shoes for women and girls. A pair of those shoes would last for years, and when outgrown by one child there were smaller children to take them."

In the newspaper report of the death of Cornelia Wait Cannon appearing in the *Mason City Globe-Gazette,* the paper described her as one of the most remarkable women in that section of the

State and noted that her lifetime spanned the years from the time James Monroe, author of the Monroe Doctrine, was President of the United States to June 20, 1921, the date of her death at the age of ninety-eight. Cornelia Wait Cannon was five years old when construction of the first railroad was started and six years old before the first locomotive pulled a train of cars upon it. She was fifteen years old when the first steamship crossed the Atlantic and twenty-one years old when the first telegraph instrument began its practical service. She was twenty-three before the first sewing machine was invented and thirty-five when the Atlantic cable was laid. She was thirty-eight when the Civil War broke out and forty when the Emancipation Proclamation set four million people free. She was fifty-three when the telephone was invented and fifty-seven when the first electric street car began to shuttle back and forth weaving the fabric of mighty city life.

Cornelia Wait Cannon did, indeed, witness many changes during her lifetime. Like other pioneer women she worked with determination in meeting the hardships of frontier life. Unlike many pioneer women, she lived long enough to enjoy the fruits of her labors.

HUGH H. SHEPARD