The Scotch Grove Trail

The Highland Scot has ever displayed canny foresight, extraordinary thrift, steady industry, and sturdy fortitude in the face of obstacles. The more intimate feelings and emotions of the Scotchman — his tender sentiments of romance and love of home — have been disclosed in the poems of Robert Burns and the songs of Sir Harry Lauder. Such were the characteristics of the "Hielanders" who came in the late thirties to Jones County, Iowa, and built their log cabin homes in the timber along the sparkling waters of the Maquoketa River.

Theirs is a simple story of pioneers to whom the fertile prairies of Iowa were a promised land for men who were eager to become "lairds" of many acres. At the same time it is a tale of what they were prepared to give Iowa in return. It was a long, hard trail from the bleak Highlands of Scotland by way of Lord Selkirk's Red River Settlement to Jones County, Iowa, yet this was the route by which Scotch Grove pioneers came to the new Territory and added their strength to the laying of the foundations for a Commonwealth.

The lot of these people had been a hard one in the desolate northern shires of Caithness and Sutherland in Scotland. Their houses for the most part were one story huts called "shielings" built of un-

cut stone, the chinks stuffed with moss, and the roof covered with turf or thatched with straw. If a "shieling" had a window it was covered with a bit of fish bladder, or the stomach lining of a sheep, or perhaps a piece of paper soaked in fish oil. Chunks of dried peat from the bogs furnished fuel for the rude fireplaces; and the "reek" or smoke from the smouldering fire often choked the inmates of a hut when the wind, swirling down the chimney, fanned the smoke into the room.

The struggle for food, too, was severe. The "Hielanders" rented the land from the several lords and sundry earls, paying a large share of their crops for the use of small patches of arable soil. They raised "kale" or cabbages, a few turnips, some oats, a little barley, and a few potatoes. They pastured sheep on the open or common land where a limited quantity of grass grew among the heather and gorse. The flocks of sheep were limited in number, however, for the gentry preferred to save the grass for deer and rabbits in order that game might be plentiful when his lordship wished to hunt. If, in addition to a few sheep, a family owned a "coo", they were considered well to do — almost equal to the gentry.

Women and girls spun wool into yarn with the distaff and spindle and wove thread into cloth on a hand loom. Oftentimes the thread was colored and woven into a plaid with the stripes and colors proclaiming the clan to which the family belonged. The women, also, dried oats and barley in a pan over the

fire and then ground the grain into meal with a "quern"—laborious work, all of it.

Yet in spite of poverty and the hard struggle for existence the "Hielanders" were happy folk, deeply religious, and loyal to the gentry until the clearances began. The general introduction of sheep farming by the nobility led to widespread eviction of the smaller tenantry. During 1812 and in the spring of 1813 evictions became so general in the Highlands that distress was everywhere prevalent. For a time serious riots occurred. Nevertheless, the Duchess of Sutherland proceeded to clear her land of tenants so as to convert her Highland domain into grazing land for sheep and into deer forests and shooting preserves. In two parishes in Sutherlandshire, Clyne and Kildonan, a single sheep farm displaced a hundred agricultural tenants with all the distress that had attended the earlier enclosures in England. It is recorded that when the Duchess of Sutherland went for a drive the indignant peasants would ring sheep bells in derision as her carriage passed. In vain, the Sutherlandshire tenantry sent a deputation to London to seek from the government some alleviation of the unemployment and destitution. There was no power in the Home Office to offset the forces of economic change.

Hence it was that the agents of Thomas Douglas, Earl of Selkirk, found the Kildonan tenants eager to accept his offer to transport them across the Atlantic to his newly established colony on the Red

River of the North where broad acres and farm implements and a home were to be theirs free. Applications came in from some seven hundred evicted tenants but less than a hundred could be taken. Little did those picked men and women realize the hardships they were to face or perhaps they would have been less eager to undertake the adventure.

Having secured a controlling interest in the Hudson's Bay Company, Lord Selkirk acquired from that organization a tract of 116,000 square miles of land lying west and south of Lake Winnipeg. It comprised roughly the area now included in the Province of Manitoba and the northern part of North Dakota and Minnesota. This tract was chiefly unbroken prairie traversed from south to north by the Red River and from west to east by the Assiniboine — a region which includes some of the best wheat land of North America. Lord Selkirk's purpose in securing control of the Hudson's Bay Company and in obtaining this huge grant of land was largely philanthropic: he hoped to afford relief to his evicted countrymen by establishing a colony in the heart of this land of promise.

Accordingly, a shipload of employees had been sent out in 1811 to prepare the way for the settlers to follow. Delays in starting from the port of Stornaway in the Hebrides and unforeseen disasters along the way retarded the arrival of the advance group at the junction of the Red and Assiniboine

rivers until August, 1812. Hasty preparations were then made to receive the second band of emigrants who arrived two months later. The officers and employees of the North-West Company, rival of the Hudson's Bay Company in the fur trade of the North, looked upon the newcomers as intruders in a territory explored by their men and in which their trading posts had long been established. Various impediments were thrown in the way of the Selkirk emigrants. From the first season, hostility developed between the settlement and the North-West Company which soon led to an open feud.

Such was the situation into which the evicted tenants of Sutherlandshire were headed when they gathered at the port of Stromness in the Orkneys. On June 28, 1813, the colonists embarked on the *Prince of Wales* and put to sea under convoy of a sloop-of-war. It was a terrible voyage. Ship fever — now known as typhoid — broke out, and the confinement and congested quarters proved fatal to many. The ship's surgeon was among the first to succumb, the disease spread rapidly to passengers and crew, and there were many burials at sea. Another misfortune was the blundering of the skipper who put the colonists ashore at Fort Churchill, instead of carrying them on down the western coast of Hudson's Bay to York Factory where Selkirk expected the expedition to land.

The settlers, weakened with fever, made what preparations they could for passing the winter at

Fort Churchill. On the sheltered, well-wooded bank of the Churchill River about fifteen miles from the fort, they built rough log houses. Thus it was necessary to make a thirty-mile trip by sledge or on snowshoes to the factory store to secure oatmeal and other provisions. Early in November, however, partridges appeared in such numbers that fresh meat was not wanting.

In the spring the colonists took up the overland journey to York Factory, travelling on snowshoes, drawing stores and provisions on rough sledges, camping at nightfall, and moving forward with the first dawn of the northern morning. The strongest of the party went ahead to beat the trail for the women and midway in the long procession marched the Highland piper, "skirling" a "pibroch" which filled the trudging emigrants with the unbending pride of their race. Thus the weary stragglers carried on to York Factory where they met with a hospitable reception. After a short halt they continued their journey by boat and reached Fort Douglas at the Forks of the Red and Assiniboine rivers early in the summer of 1814.

There, on the site of the present city of Winnipeg, Governor Miles MacDonnell welcomed the new colonists, alloted to each head of a family one hundred acres of land fronting on the Red River, and supplied the settlers with horses, arms, ammunition, tools, and seed. Help was given them to erect their log cabins along the bank of the river. By autumn

houses and barns were built, potatoes and other vegetables were harvested, each family possessed some poultry, and a few cows were held in common. That winter was the first since the earliest settlers had arrived at the Forks in 1812 that the colonists found it unnecessary to move south to the Pembina River in order to be near the herds of buffalo for their food supply. Surely this was the promised land.

But the hostility of the North-West Company to the apparently firmly established colony grew apace. It was fanned to white heat by Governor MacDonnell's proclamation prohibiting the servants of the North-West Company from taking pemmican, or dried venison, from Selkirk's land, and the officers of the company began a resolute campaign of subtle policy against the colony. During the winter of 1814 Duncan Cameron at the North-West trading post, Fort Gilbralter, across the Red River entertained the Kildonan men and women at gay parties. By offers of free passage to Upper Canada, by a generous promise of land to each settler who would desert the colony, and by threats, cajolery, and bribes he secured the defection of a large number of the settlers. When the widowed mother of two of the pioneers who afterward came to Iowa was asked to desert the settlement she replied, "As for me and mine, we will keep faith. We have eaten Selkirk's bread, we dwell on lands he bought. We stay here as long as he wishes and if we perish, we perish."

During the summer of 1815 a notice signed by Cuthbert Grant, who had been appointed by the North-West Company to command the Bois-Brûlés, or French-Indian half-breeds, ordered the rest of the settlers to retire immediately from the Red River. The capture of Governor MacDonnell and an attack on the colony compelled the remnant of Selkirk's colonists to depart. They sorrowfully quitted their homes and proceeded in canoes to the mouth of Red River thence across Lake Winnipeg to a new abode at a trading post on Jack River. With fierce exultation the employees of the North-West Company applied the torch to cabins and barns and trampled the crops under foot.

In the meantime another party of settlers had been recruited from Sutherlandshire and were en route for the abandoned Red River Settlement. With these "Hielanders" in the expedition of 1815 came the new governor, Robert Semple. Word of the approaching reinforcements induced the fugitives on Jack River to return to the site of their colony and upon the arrival of Governor Semple and old neighbors from Kildonan the Scotch began to rebuild their ruined homes.

The influx of more immigrants, however, only added fuel to the flame of hatred between the rival fur companies. During the following winter the blaze kindled and in the summer of 1816 the conflagration swept down upon the Red River Colony in the attack of Bois-Brûlés led by Cuthbert Grant.

Governor Semple and a score of men lay dead after the fatal clash at Seven Oaks on the afternoon of June 19, 1816. Again the ill-fated colonists withdrew down the Red River.

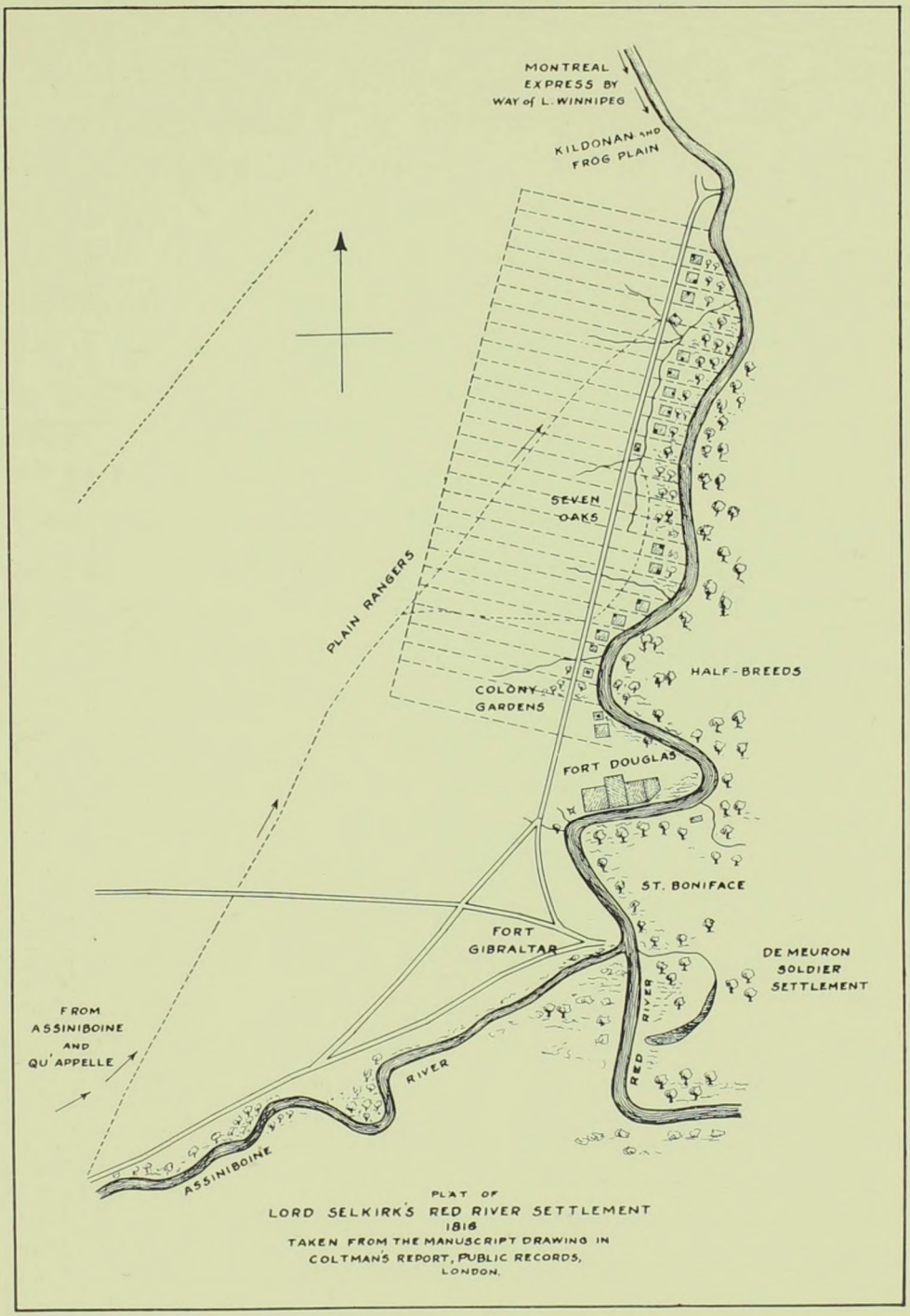
Lord Selkirk himself now came to the rescue of his unhappy people. With a force organized from the disbanded De Meuron regiment of mercenary soldiers of the War of 1812 he swooped down on Fort William, the headquarters of the North-West Company on Lake Superior, and captured it. Then in 1817 he visited the Red River Settlement where he was able to rally his scattered colonists and to assure them of protection. He listened sympathetically to their complaints, shook the hand of everyone, deeded them tracts of land for a church, a cemetery, and a school, and directed that the settlement should be called "Kildonan" after their old home in Scotland. To the soldiers of the De Meuron regiment he alloted land on the east side of the Red River. Arrangements were made for an experimental farm on a large scale, while public roads, bridges, and a new mill site were planned. Moreover, a treaty with surrounding tribes of Indians gave the settlers assurance of freedom from attack by the savages.

Lord Selkirk's vigorous assault upon the North-West Company, however, resulted disastrously for him. Arrested and tried for his part in the affair he was found guilty and fined, while those concerned in the massacre of Seven Oaks were acquitted.

This broke the spirit of Selkirk and he died in 1820 a disappointed man. One year later a union was effected between the Hudson's Bay Company and their ancient foes, the North-West Company.

Apparently the troubles of the Scotch colonists on the Red River were over and no longer would they be ground like wheat between the upper and nether millstones of the two rival fur companies. But they were not happy. Farming in this country of long, cold winters and short summers was but little more of a success than it had been in the bleak, rough Highlands of Sutherlandshire. Moreover, there was no market for surplus products when there were any. The school and church promised by the Hudson's Bay Company had not materialized. True, a rector of the Church of England came to the colony; but shades of solemn leagues and covenants and Jenny Geddes with her stool, could Scotch Presbyterians be satisfied with a minister of the Church of England? Grasshopper plagues, too, ruined the crops for two or three seasons and as in the early days of the colony, hunting had to be resorted to for a living. The arbitrary rules of the Company caused much dissatisfaction. Agents inspected everything that was shipped out and all furs had to be sold through the Company. The colonists called the Hudson's Bay Company the "Smug Old Lady".

To the credit of the Company, be it said, however, that honest efforts were made in behalf of the colony. Sheep were brought from the United States at great



THE SELKIRK SETTLEMENT

expense, and horses and cattle were imported from England at heavy cost. The experimental farm projected by Selkirk was like a baronial estate. At one time when grasshoppers had destroyed the crops, agents of the colony purchased some three hundred bushels of wheat, oats, and peas at Prairie du Chein, Wisconsin, and when the seed was finally delivered at Red River Colony the cost to the Company was said to be £1040 sterling.

Confronted with all these disadvantages of the Red River Colony while the children grew to maturity, the canny Scotchmen began to ponder ways of improving their situation. Word filtered back over the Red River trail from St. Paul of opportunities to buy cheap farms in the rich valley of the Mississippi River in the "States". Many Swiss immigrants whom Selkirk's agents had sent to the Red River Settlement in the early twenties had already migrated to the reputed Eldorado of the South. Accordingly, in 1835 Alexander McLain went down to the recently opened strip of territory in eastern Iowa known as the "Black Hawk Purchase". Like Joshua of old he explored the country, and carried back a glowing report of a fertile prairie land, well watered and having sufficient timber for building, located about fifty miles from Dubuque.

After his return to the settlement, a group consisting of John Sutherland, with his ten sons and two daughters, Alexander Sutherland, David McCoy, Joseph Brimner, and Alexander McLain with their

families set out on the thousand mile trek to a new promised land. They loaded into their Pembina carts a few possessions — bedding, cooking utensils, coarse flour, pemmican, clothing, tools, and some relics brought from Scotland — and departed on the long, hard trip.

The Red River or Pembina cart was a home invention. They were rude, wooden vehicles put together without a particle of iron. The wheels were without tires, were five or six feet in diameter, and had a tread about four inches wide. From the base of the rectangular body of the cart extended the heavy shafts between which one animal, usually an ox, was harnessed with strips of rawhide. Each cart could carry a load of six or eight hundred pounds which was protected from rain by a buffalo robe or canvas cover. These carts, while crude and clumsy in appearance, would go where another vehicle would flounder.

Day by day the caravan crawled slowly southward, while the heavy wheels which had never known grease kept up an incessant creaking and groaning. When night approached the carts were drawn into a circle with the shafts pointing inward and within this temporary fortification camp was pitched. The animals were either allowed to graze or tethered on the outside of the circle. Every precaution was taken to guard against an Indian attack, and the men stood watch in turn until dawn. Rivers were forded and numerous sloughs and marshes

crossed, the wide-wheeled carts leaving a deep track in the soft ground of the lowlands. Mosquitoes, black flies, and gnats tormented the plodding caravan; and the mid-day sun beat down without mercy upon them. Sometimes the carts sank to the hubs in mud and water; again the travellers were covered with a thick coat of dust as the carts in single file rolled along the Red River trail. Sometimes roving bands of Indians approached and killed a cow which the settlers could ill afford to lose.

On they came, making about fifteen miles a day, across the present State of Minnesota and down the west side of the Mississippi River to Dubuque. The same fortitude that enabled the tenants of Kildonan to brave the perils of a long ocean voyage and to endure the hardships at the Red River Colony enabled this first group of Scotch pioneers to push on to the banks of the Maquoketa River. Although the effect of the long and toilsome journey of almost four months was traced on nearly every face in lines of care, the sight of their new home restored hope. Along the banks of the river, as far as they could see, a belt of timber marked its course. Before them stretched the fertile prairie in an almost unbroken level to the sky line. The prairie grass was most luxuriant and the fall flowers, richly tinted, bloomed on every side. The future loomed large.

In 1838 a second band came from the Red River Colony to the Scotch Grove settlement. In this party, among others, were Donald and Ebenezer

Sutherland and Donald Sinclair with their families. Mrs. Sinclair had been a waiting maid in Scotland and her stories of court life were in continual demand by her companions. Her husband was a peaceable, devout man yet fearless in defending his rights. It is related that on this trip one of the bachelors in the group spoke insultingly to Mrs. Sinclair, who replied, "If you say that again, I'll slap your mouth."

"I'll do more than slap your mouth," was the man's retort.

Suddenly from somewhere appeared Donald Sinclair who had by chance overheard the conversation. "Ye'll hae to slap me, first, mon," he said quietly, and then he proceeded to administer a thorough thrashing to the man who had annoyed his wife.

This trip, like the first emigration, occupied the entire summer and the weary travellers arrived at the Scotch Grove settlement in the early autumn. Again in 1840 another delegation followed the route of the Red River trail to St. Paul and thence south to the Iowa prairies of Jones County. In this group were Donald and John Livingston, David Esson, and Lawrence Devaney with their families. The Devaneys quit the caravan at Dubuque, where a son was born.

In some ways this was the most difficult and discouraging journey of the three principal migrations to Iowa. On the Red River section of the trail the guide took sick and one of the party, in endeavoring

to fill his place, led the caravan through the swamps of Minnesota for days and finally emerged at the spot where they had entered. Grandmother Livingston was an old lady when this journey began. She could have remained with friends on the Red River but she insisted upon making the trip. She rode in one of the jolting, springless carts and was warned not to try to get out of it without help. Somehow she eluded the vigilance of her relatives one day and in trying to climb down from the box of the cart alone, she slipped and broke a leg. What was to be done? No doctor, no splints! The men set the broken bone and bound the fracture with bark for splints and strips of sheets for bandages. Feather beds were piled in the cart to make the suffering woman as comfortable as possible but the jolting of the rude conveyance was unbearable. As soon as the headwaters of the Mississippi were reached the men constructed a crude raft on which the injured woman was placed and one of her sons was assigned the task of poling the raft downstream. The route of the caravan led away from the river and great apprehension was felt about the progress of the raft and its occupants. When the emigrants again approached the river several days were spent in anxious waiting before the raft was sighted floating downstream. This journey like the others occupied the entire summer but eventually the wayfarers, Grandmother Livingston and all, were welcomed by friends who had preceded them to Scotch Grove.

During the years of the migrations to Jones County other Scotch "Hielanders" from Red River Colony came southward but were deflected to other localities. James Livingston, Alexander Rose, and Angus Matthieson, for instance, settled in Upper Scotch Grove where the town of Hopkinton is located; while the McIntyres, Campbells, and some of the Matthiesons crossed the Mississippi to the lead-mine region opposite Bellevue, Iowa.

Pioneer days at Scotch Grove and in Upper Scotch Grove were laborious, yet the settlers were happy for nature was kind to them and the future was filled with promise. Log cabins were built, gardens were spaded, and the fields were planted. Everyone worked — men, women, and children.

To-day a visitor stopping at one of the prosperous homes of Scotch Grove may observe two round stones, six inches thick and about two feet in diameter, used as a door step. These old quern stones, brought from the Highlands to Red River, and thence to Iowa, are mute reminders of the days when two Scotch women, squatting on the floor, alternately pushed and pulled the handle of the upper stone while the wheat, poured by hand into a hole in the middle of the top stone, was ground into coarse flour between the corrugated faces of the quern and fell from the edges to a cloth on the floor below.

Bee trees along the Maquoketa supplied the settlers with honey which was stored in improvised

kegs made from thick logs. Bunches of wild grapes mixed with the honey made a tasty sauce to spread on hot biscuits. The cooking was done in the fireplaces where a crane supporting a heavy iron kettle was swung over the fire. "Scones", or thin biscuits, were baked in skillets which stood on short iron legs over a bed of coals at the edge of the fireplace. Fried pies — a favorite dessert — were made by cutting a round crust the size of a saucer, pouring cooked sauce on one half, folding the other half over and crimping the edges together, then frying the pastry in a skillet or kettle of hot grease. To-day a Selkirk teapot, a few copper utensils, some heavy iron skillets, lidded pots with little legs, and a square tin candle lantern with perforated sides — surviving relics of the long trail — are the prized possessions of the descendants of these Scotch pioneers.

For many years the nearest mill to the Scotch Grove settlers was on Catfish Creek and the nearest market for grain and hogs was Dubuque, fifty miles distant. Then it took a day and a half to go to market while to-day the grandchildren of these pioneers make the trip to Dubuque in almost as many hours. Two of the Livingstons from the Upper Grove on separate trips to Dubuque were frozen to death in prairie blizzards. The wife of one of these men, mother of nine children, set to work with Scotch fortitude to keep the farm and to raise and educate her family. Her success was another triumph for Scotch frugality and industry.

The Jones County settlement prospered materially, and at the same time religion and education were not neglected. The First Presbyterian Church of Scotch Grove was organized in the log house of Ebenezer Sutherland in 1841, and has been the center of the community life of the township to this day. In 1851 a church was built and ten years later a larger and finer house of worship was erected by these devout Scotchmen. The eccentric Michael Hummer, of "Hummer's Bell" fame, was the first minister who served this parish. Other strong men have since been ministers of the Scotch Grove church and their influence has extended wherever the children of the pioneers have gone.

The older men and women who came from Red River used the Gaelic language extensively, especially when asking a blessing at meals or in offering prayers in public. During the early seventies a Scotch evangelist came to Scotch Grove to assist the minister, Reverend John Rice, in conducting a "protracted meeting". One Sunday, the evangelist consented to preach a sermon in Gaelic. As the impassioned words of his discourse rang out from the pulpit in the language they loved so well, tears welled up in the eyes of these men and women of the long trail and rolled unheeded down their cheeks.

The pioneers also provided schools for the "bairns", first at different homes in the settlement, then in a log cabin schoolhouse built near the center of the township. In 1860 a more commodious schoolhouse was erected. The teacher boarded

'round and received sixteen dollars a month for his services. Nor was higher education neglected, for the rolls of Lenox College at Hopkinton contain the names of many Scotch Grove boys and girls who went to college in the days when this privilege was accorded only to a small number of Iowa's young men and women.

Little wonder was it that in such a locality where industry and religion went hand in hand and where love of home and interest in education were outstanding traits that patriotism, too, was genuine and vigorous. The records of the Civil War show that no men were drafted from Scotch Grove Township; in fact, the township furnished more than its quota of volunteers. The muster rolls of the World War reveal the names of many lads whose grandfathers and great grandfathers followed the long trail from the Red River to Iowa.

The descendants of these pioneers are proud of their families and their Scotch blood. Why shouldn't they be? The story of the long journey from the Highlands of Sutherlandshire to Lord Selkirk's Colony and by ox-cart brigade to Iowa is a tale of courageous adventure. Let them revere the flowers of the clans to which they have a right to belong. Let them honor their "tartans" or "plaids"— backgrounds of green or black or red or blue with fine overlay in lines of contrasting color. Let them thrill with pride to hear the songs of Old Scotland. It is their rightful heritage.

BRUCE E. MAHAN