

# THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

VOL. XLI

ISSUED IN NOVEMBER 1960

No. 11

*Copyright 1960 by The State Historical Society of Iowa*



## The Pioneer Log Cabin

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 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.

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 independence. 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.

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.

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. 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 per-

manent 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.

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 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."

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.

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.

Let us move up the Mississippi to the mineral region 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.

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.

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 a 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."

Such courtroom facilities were not uncommon. 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.

No matter how humble, the log cabin nevertheless was home, and a man's home was his castle, and well worth fighting for. None fought more savagely for his home than John "Wild Cat" Wilson, a pioneer of Scott County, who, with his two sons, was clearing a claim and building a cabin on the road between Blue Grass and Davenport. Some surly followers of Black Hawk, on their way to trade with George Davenport in 1836, looked upon Wilson as an intruder and ordered him to stop making any improvements. Since the improvement was in the Black Hawk

Purchase "Old Wild Cat" had a perfect right to settle there. Furthermore, he was not inclined to heed the threats of the Indians. According to Willard Barrows:

The Indians, after remaining in Davenport and on the Island for a few days, left for their home, full of whisky, and ripe for a quarrel. On arriving at Wilson's they got off . . . turned their ponies loose, laid off their blankets and deliberately prepared for a fight. Wilson and his two sons were all there were of the whites. Wilson was a short distance in the woods chopping. The attack was made upon James, who was driving the team. He ran for his father and Samuel. On their arrival, the old man, who never feared Indian or white man, bear or wild cat, pitched in for a general fight. The Indians, some twelve or fourteen in number, soon had "Old Wild Cat" down, when one of the boys, not having any weapon, unyoked an ox, and with the bow knocked down two or three of the Indians, which released his father, who springing to his feet caught his axe, which he had dropped in the first onset, and turning upon them, he struck an Indian in the back, splitting him open from the neck nearly to the small of the back. This dampened the ardor of the savages for a moment, when Wilson made at them again, when they gathered up the wounded Indian and fled. He soon died, and the next Sunday the Indians gathered in great numbers in the neighborhood of Wilson's with threatening aspects.

Wilson, with his boys and a few neighbors, was fortified in John Friday's cabin, where the Indians kept them nearly all day. A runner was sent to Mr. Le Claire and Col. Davenport, who settled the matter with the Indians, and cautioned them about traveling across the lands of "Old Wild Cat," telling them of his threats; that he would scalp

the first "red-skin" he caught upon that trail. The Indians made a new trail from Davenport, running further North, through Little's Grove, and were never known to pass Wilson's after that.

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. 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, dif-

ferent parts of the work being awarded to different individuals.

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.

Sometimes the men were not present and the pioneer women found their log cabins a refuge from the molestation of Indians. Thus, James M. Bowling, a Virginian who settled in Buffalo Township in Scott County in 1835, commenced farming at the mouth of Bowling's Creek. That fall he went back to Virginia, married, and in 1836 returned with his wife and two sisters. As Willard Barrows relates:

In 1837, he had the prospect of a fine crop, but the Indians, who still loitered about the country, were encamped upon this creek. In June, there were some five hundred Indians living near him, and very troublesome. They set fire to the prairie and burned up the fence surrounding his corn, which was at the time six inches high. The Indian horses then ate much of it, and he was compelled in the heat of summer to cut timber and make rails to enclose his field again; but, notwithstanding all his misfortune, he succeeded in raising a very good crop. The Indians, however, were a constant annoyance to him.

In his absence, on one occasion, a lot of Indians came to the house, and Mrs. Bowling having the doors fastened by putting a gimlet over the latch, with his sisters, remained in silence for some time, until they pushed out the chinking of the cabin near the door, and running in their

arms, pulled out the gimlet, when Mrs. Bowling and sisters braced themselves against the door, and by main strength kept them at bay, until, weary of the effort to make an entry, they left the premises. This is but one instance among many of the trials and hardships to which the first settlers were exposed, and through which they passed with patience and toil.

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.

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 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 town-site 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 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.

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, in a word the log 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 personal recollection that "a log cabin is like an omnibus or street car in this, that there is always room inside for one more."

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

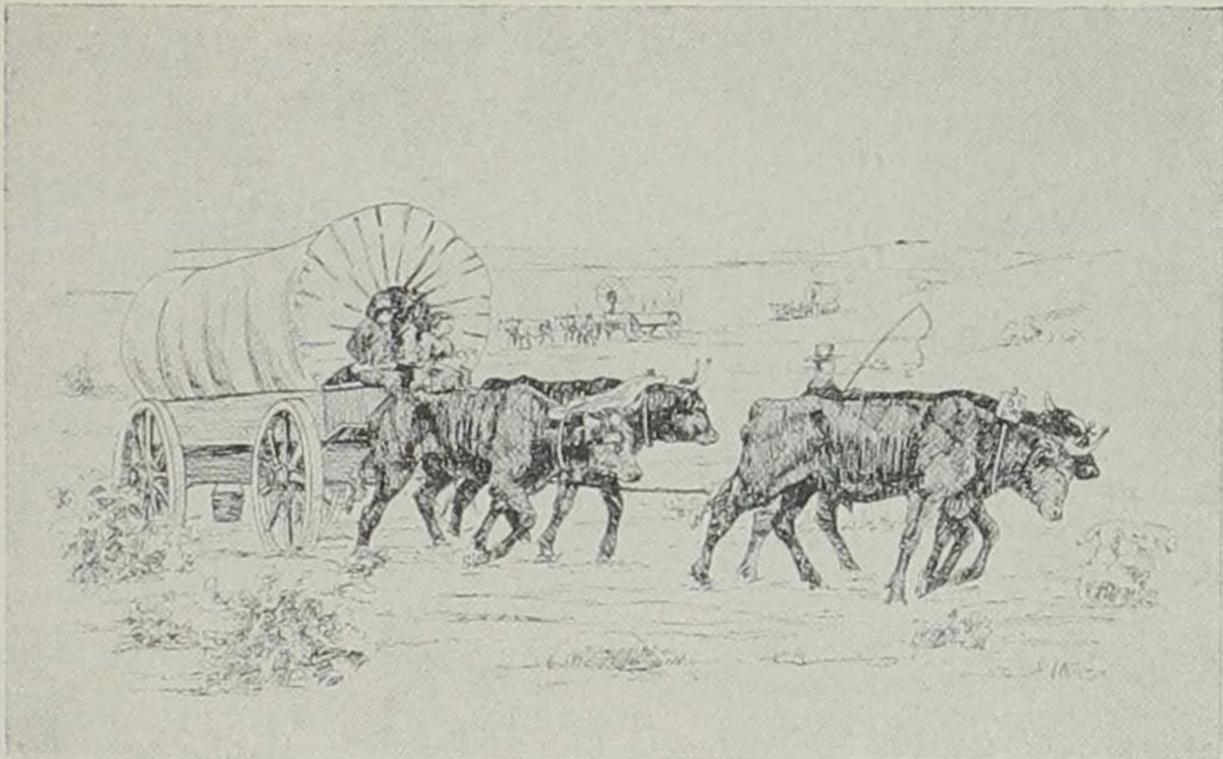
answered all these purposes. In front of the open side was built a large log heap, which served for warmth in cold weather and for cooking purposes in all seasons. Of course there was an abundance of light, and, on either side of the fire, plenty of space to go in and out. Although more easily constructed than the ordinary cabin, the three-faced camp was not common in Iowa and when erected served only as a temporary abode.

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 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."

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

Those log cabins that were strewn along the



From *Closz, Reminiscences of Newcastle*  
Covered Wagon — On the Way to Iowa

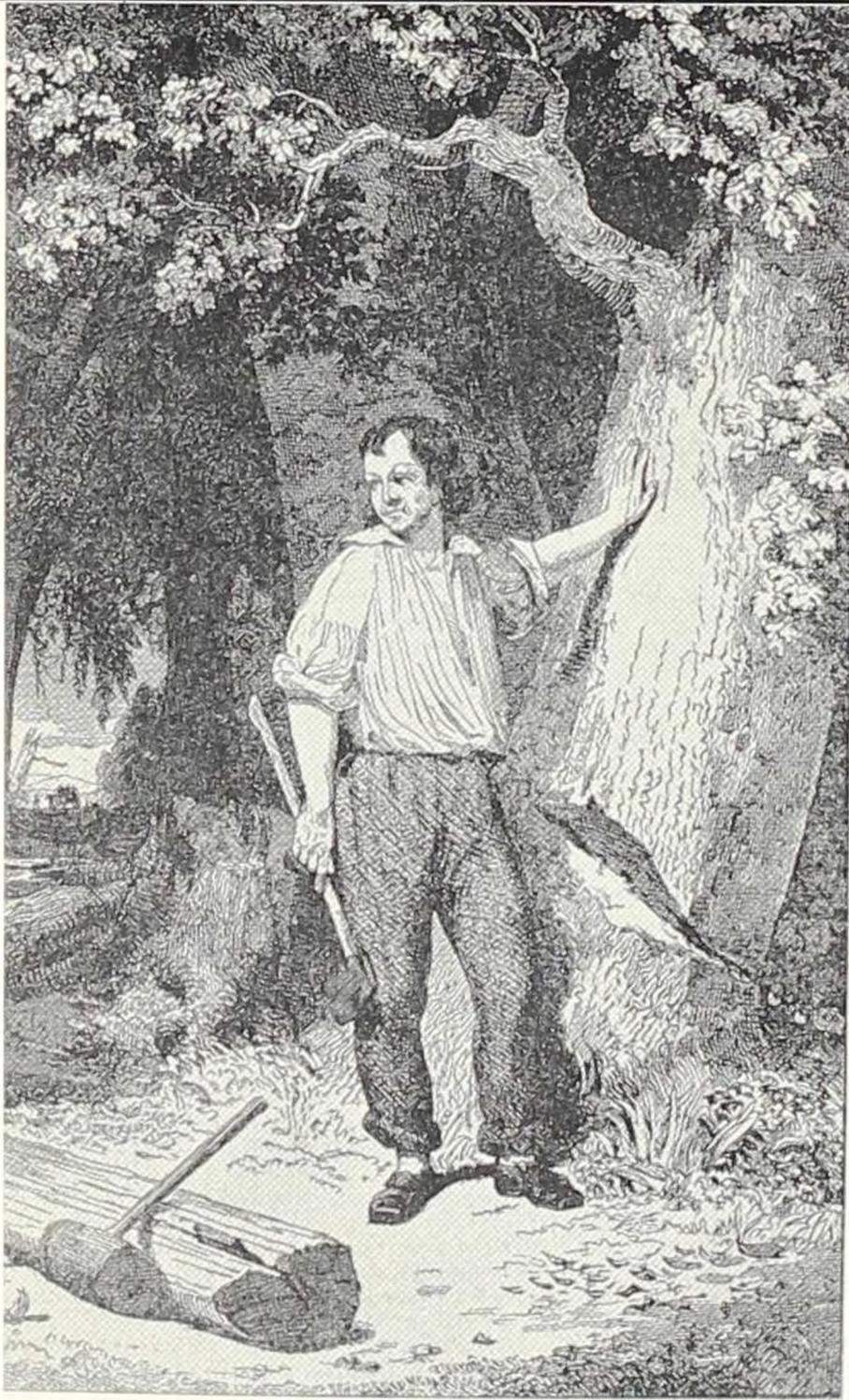
The covered wagon is a symbol of the westward advance of the pioneers into Iowa. In his *A Glimpse of Iowa in 1846*, John B. Newhall records:

The great thoroughfares of Illinois and Indiana, in the years of 1836-7 . . . would be literally lined with the long blue wagons of the emigrants slowly wending their way over the broad prairies — the cattle and hogs, men and dogs, and frequently women and children, forming the rear of the van — often ten, twenty, and thirty wagons in company. Ask them, when and where you would, their destination was the "Black Hawk Purchase."

During a single month in 1854 fully 1,743 Iowa-bound wagons passed a point beyond Peoria, Illinois. The following year a traveler saw forty-nine wagons from Michigan, "bound for Iowa," cross an Illinois stream.

During 1855 the *Burlington Telegraph* chronicled six or seven hundred immigrant teams daily. "About one team in a hundred is labelled 'Nebraska;' all the rest are marked 'Iowa.'" The rush into northern Iowa was recorded in the *Dubuque Reporter*:

Day by day the endless procession moves on — a mighty army of invasion. . . . Tarrying no longer amongst us than is necessary for them to select their future home, away they hie to the capacious and inviting plains. . . . Soon will be seen innumerable the farmer's comfortable abode, and the frequent thriving village, with its "people's college," as its highest worldly pride, and close at hand the house of God. . . .

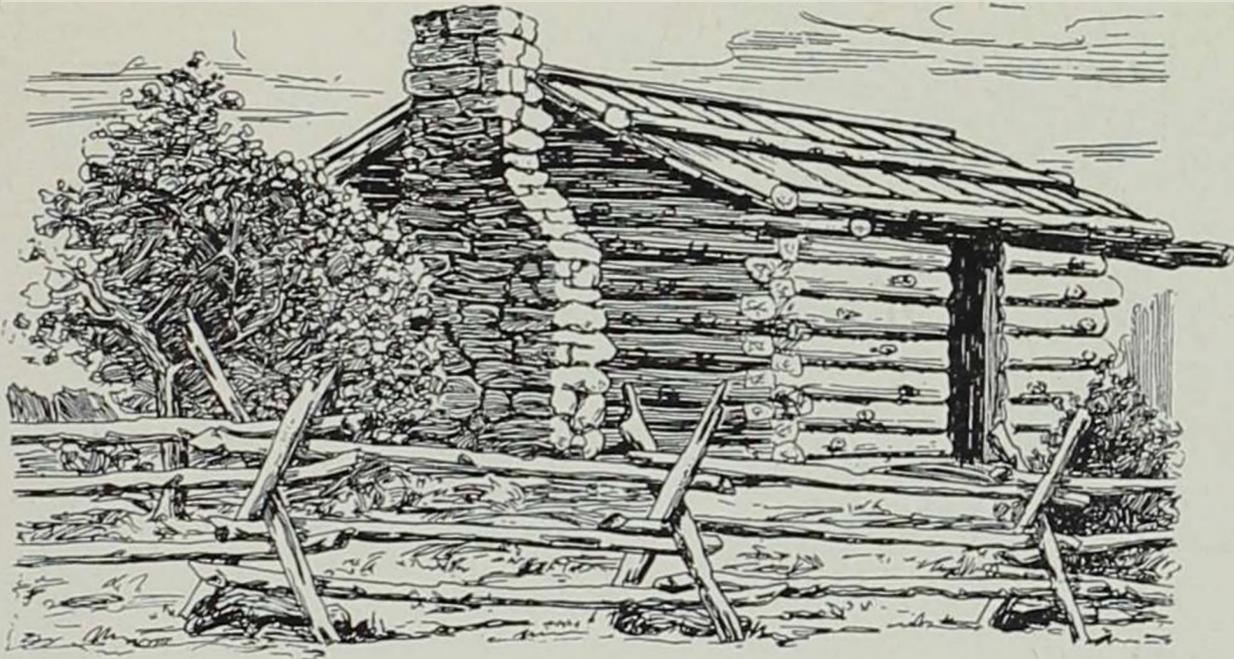


## THE PIONEER AND HIS AXE

There stands the young and vigorous pioneer, buoyant with hope and high expectations of the future, stripped for the mighty contest between human strength and the giant forest-sons of nature. With his axe in hand he stands alone in the midst of the vast wilderness, far from the hallowed associations of youth and the charities of home and of neighborhood, prepared to prostrate the umbrageous forest and admit the life-giving sunbeams to the exuberant bosom of mother earth. . . . His axe was his trusty claymore, his young wife — his country's honor — universal freedom — these composed his oriflamme to encourage him in

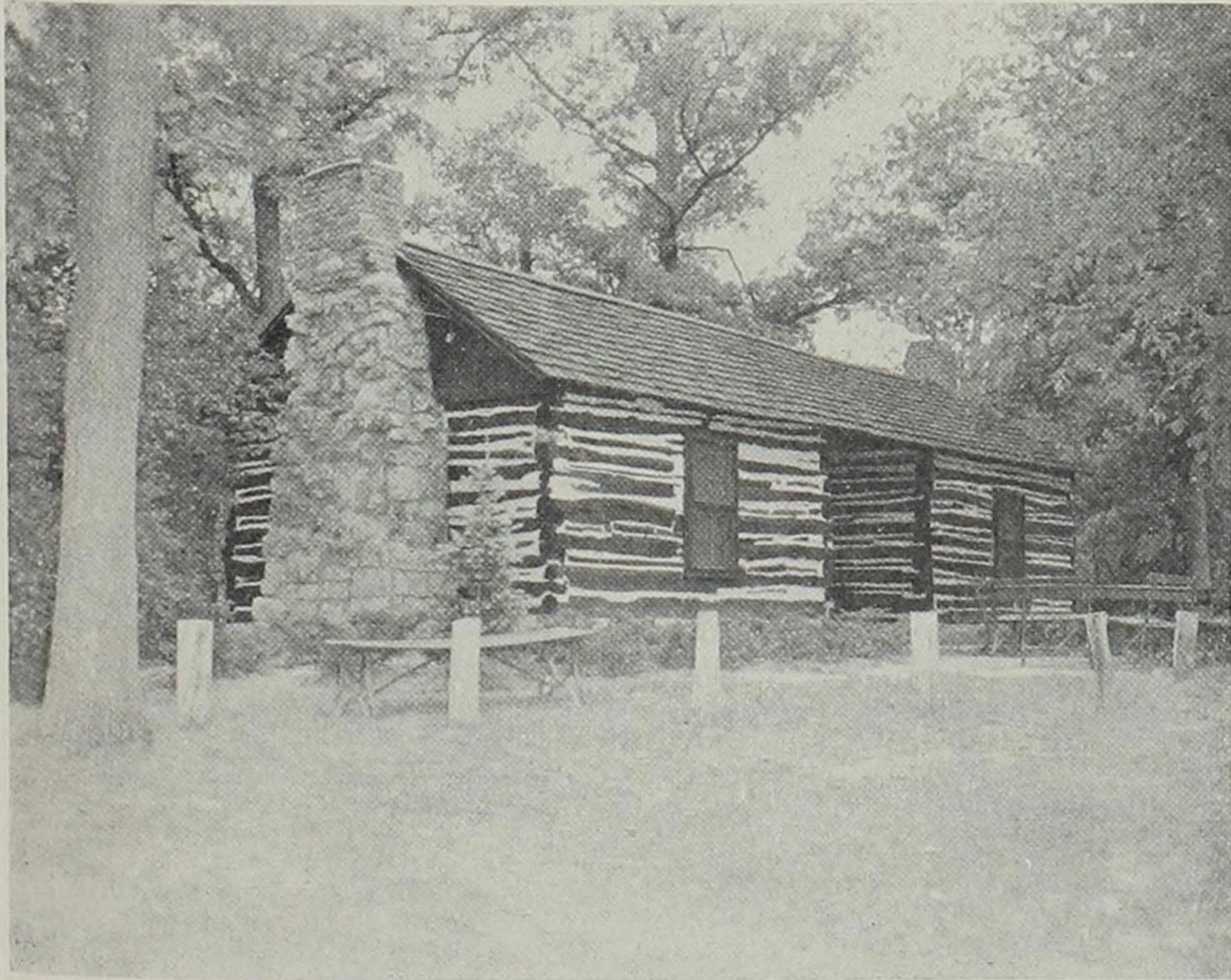
the heat of battle; and his cause was the cause of religion, humanity, truth, equity and freedom. With such a weapon, such a rallying standard, such a noble incitement, did the hardy pioneer wrestle with the gnarled oak and towering beech till they were overcome, and luxuriant grainfields like a green oasis in the midst of the desert, gladdened his heart with the smiles of abundant prosperity. Where he had recently fought his victorious battle, a village uprose, a monumental trophy of his prowess; and from eastern lands — lands where his ancestors dwell — the commercial marts upon the borders of the sea — he hears the echo of his song of triumph, and beholds a mighty tide of physical and intellectual strength flowing on in his track, to populate, beautify and enrich the domain he has conquered, and to rear and foster there other pioneers to push farther onward toward the sands of the great Pacific.

*The Family Magazine (1840)*



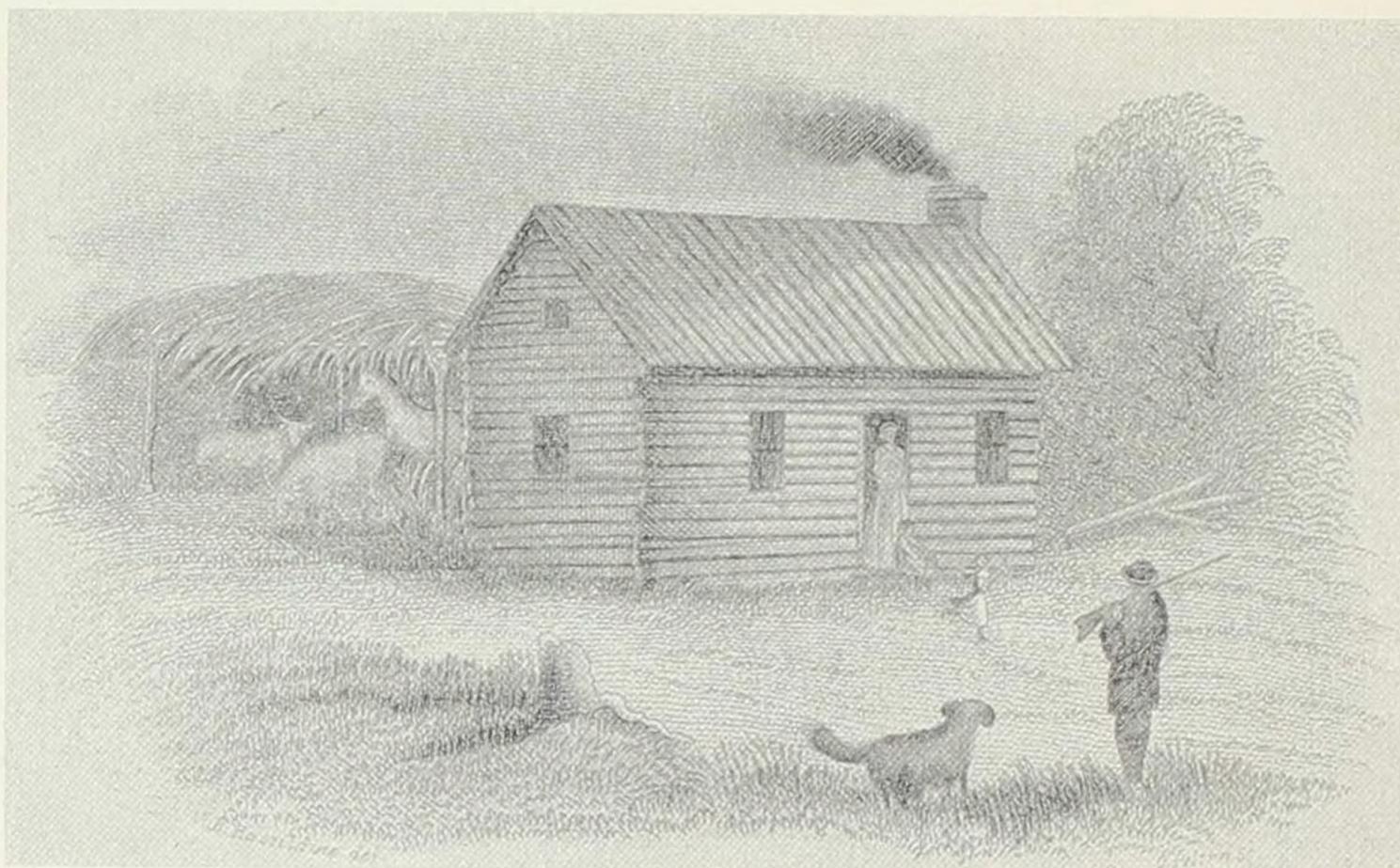
*From Olosz, Reminiscences of Newcastle*  
A Pioneer Log Cabin

The log cabin symbolizes the youth of the frontier, a youth through which every Iowa community had to pass. It was usually rough hewn — as rough as the pioneer himself. It had the strength of the pioneer in warding off attack, or in sheltering him from rough weather. It symbolized independence and it exemplified the spirit of cooperation through the old-fashioned "log-raising." It served not only as home but also as a church, courthouse, hotel, school, and as a center for quilting bees, singing schools, and other social functions.

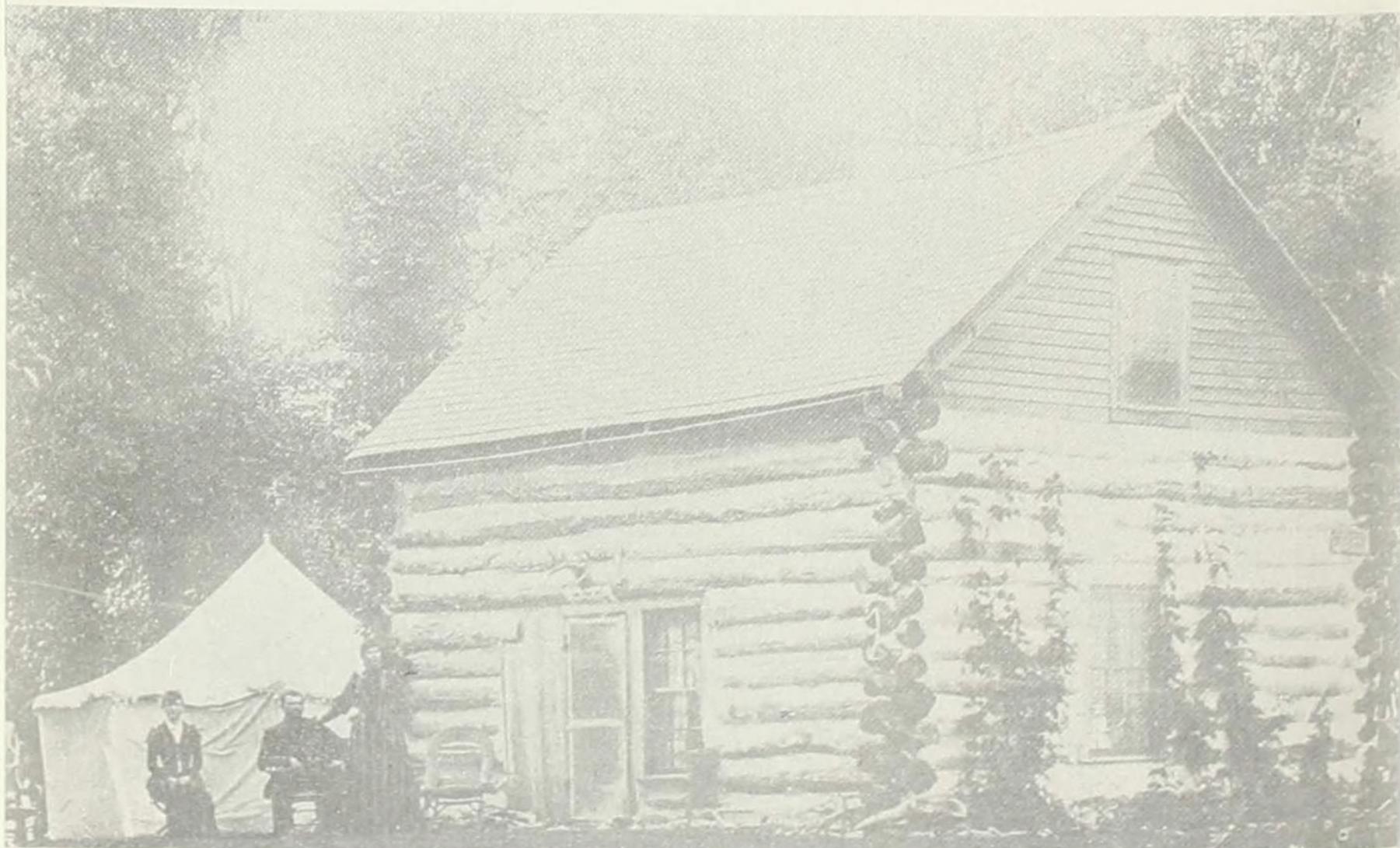


*From the State Historical Society Collections*  
The Oldest Log Cabin in Iowa  
The Newman Log Cabin in Eagle Point Park — Dubuque

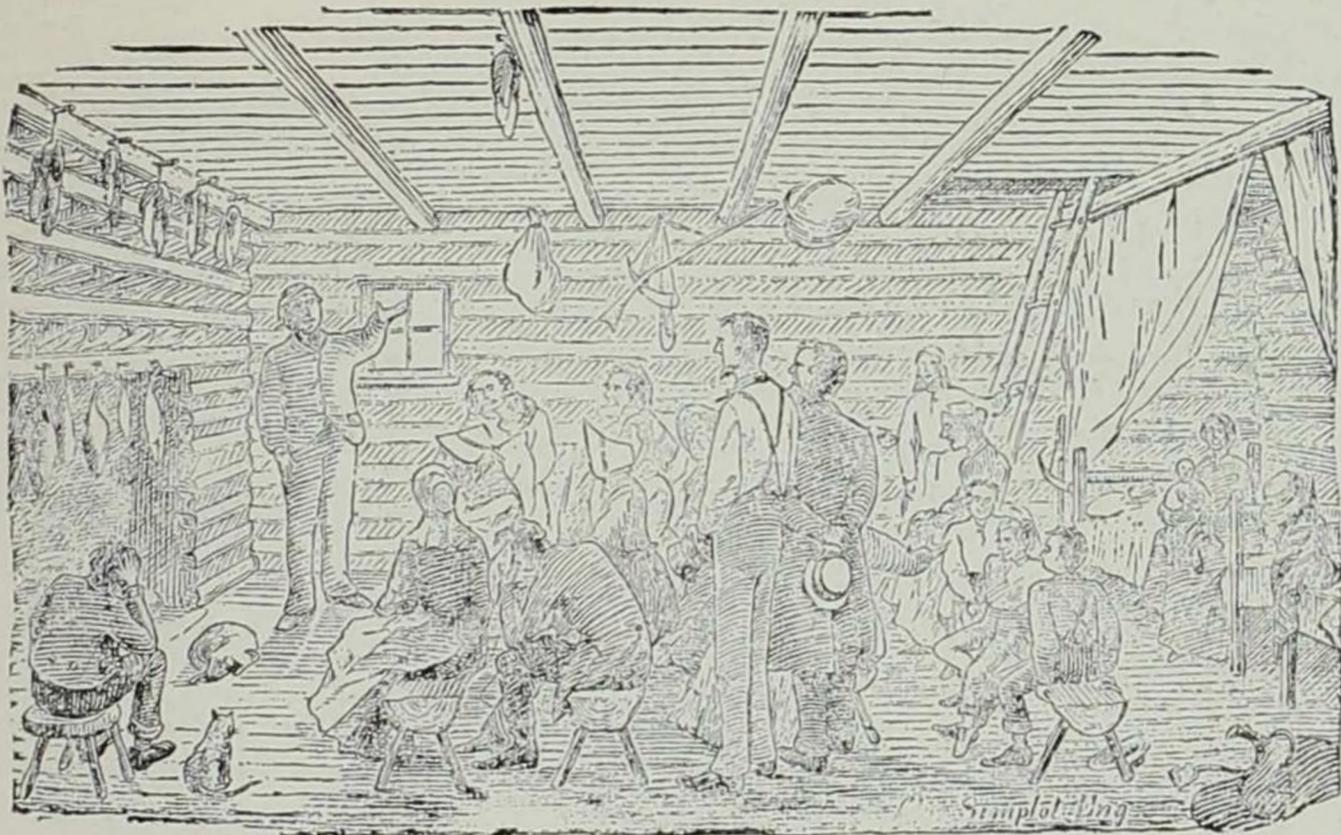
LOG CABIN HOMES



*From Fowler, Woman on the American Frontier (1882)*  
Return of the Hunter



*From Sharp, The Spirit Lake Massacre*  
Gardner Cabin on Lake Okoboiji — Scene of Spirit Lake Massacre

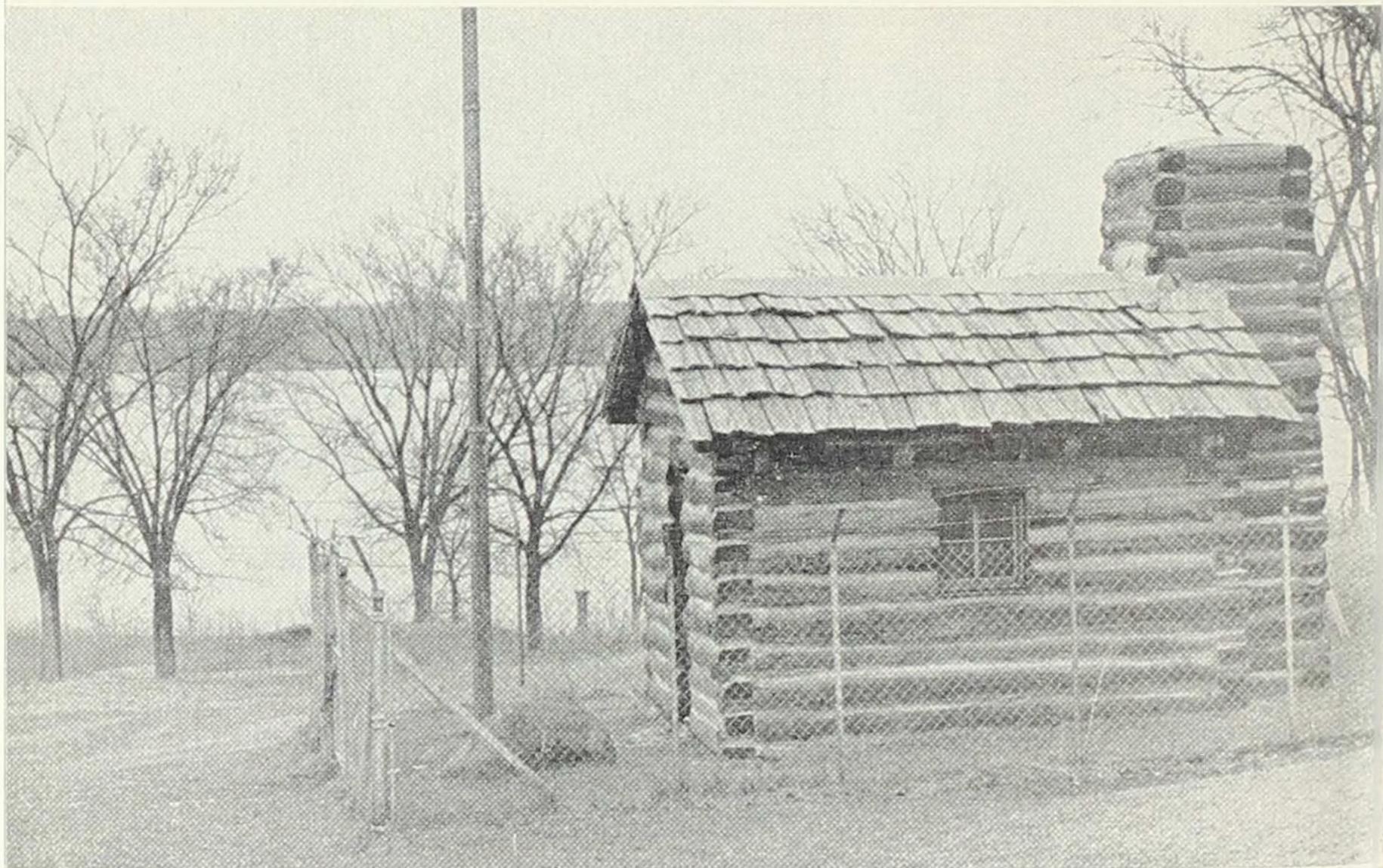


From Rittenhouse, *Boyhood Life in Iowa* (1880)

### Sermon in Father Simeon Clark's Log Cabin

In his memoirs of forty years ago, published in Dubuque in 1880, Rufus Rittenhouse describes the log cabin of Father Simeon Clark, and the soul-searching sermon he heard there in 1840.

Father Simeon Clark in those days never wore anything but a red handkerchief on his head—I never saw him with anything else and believe no one ever did. He was an excellent rifle-shot and a good bee-hunter; his residence some ten miles west of Dubuque, was built near the head of a deep vale, in a sort of horse-shoe. Father Clark's house may have been fifteen feet by twenty-five, one end nearly all chimney, at the opposite end stood two beds, puncheon floors, doors the same, roof covered with clapboards and ridge poles, small cock-loft overhead. It was in the spring of '40, I was at the house to hear him preach; puncheon benches had been brought in as was the custom, to seat all who might come; there may have been twenty persons present—four or five men, some long gaunt women, and the balance principally children; around the fireplace hung a dozen or more great venison hams swinging to and fro, drying for a time of need. Here Father Clark delivered his discourse, a masterly one. I have many times since listened to more eloquent discourses but never to any so impressive. The reader will pause for a moment and turn to the twelfth chapter and twenty-fifth verse, where he will find in Paul's advice to the Hebrews, "See that ye refuse not him that speaketh." Father Clark dwelt on the depravity of mankind, that all men were sinners, and finally wound up by saying that perhaps not more than two or three in that little assembly would be saved: 'twas a solemn time; Father Clark and Bro. John Paul made two that I was sure would be saved, but as he said two or three *might* be saved, I thought Brother Morrison might make up the three; I looked upon the balance as lost; as for myself I had done nothing to merit salvation; true I had given the Spanish quarter that I had hid in the root house, which my grandfather had given me, for the conversion of the heathen, and though I had taken the preacher for my mother to cook dinner for, I gave myself up for lost.



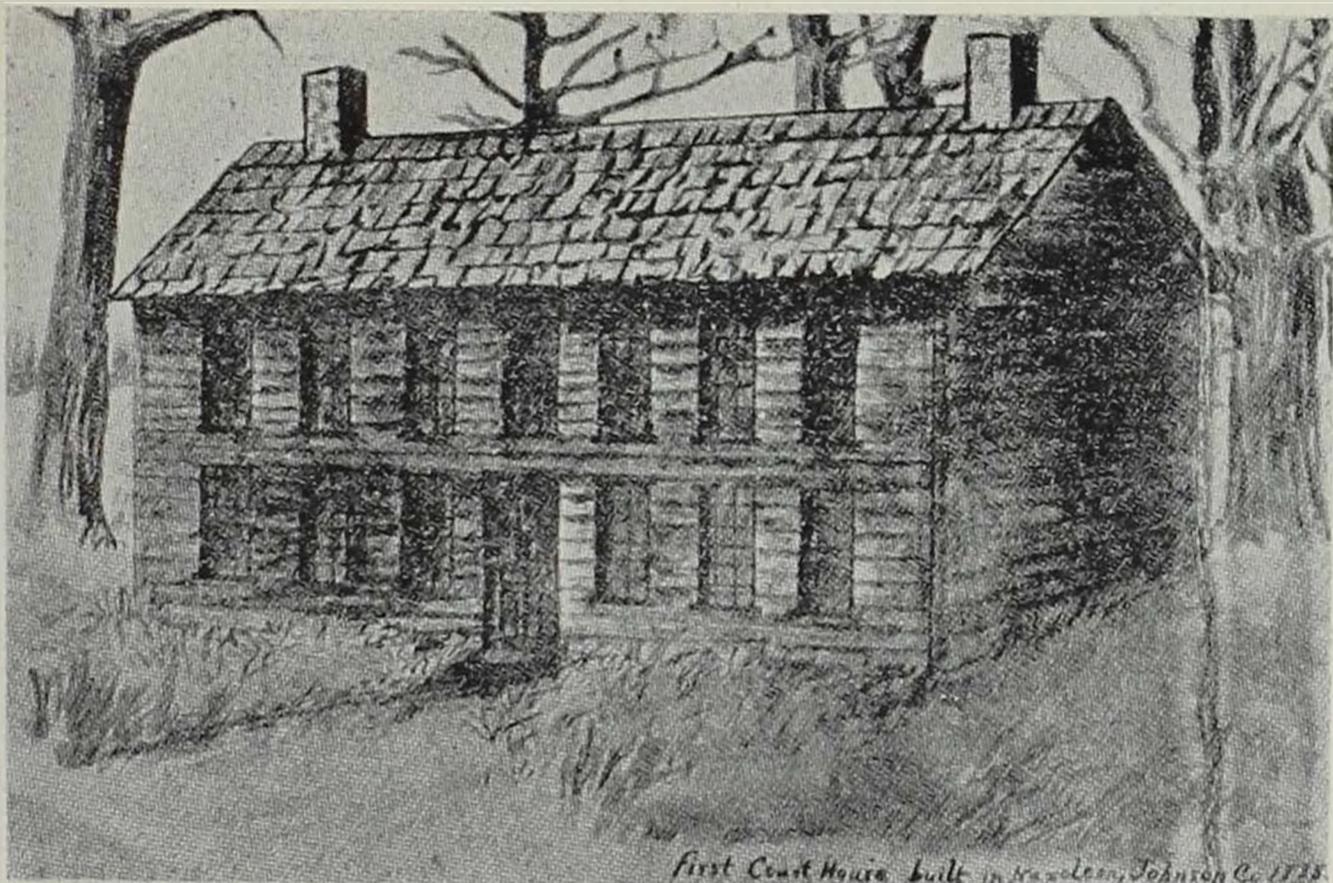
*From the State Historical Society Collections*

Replica of First School in Iowa — 1830

The first school teacher in Iowa was Berryman Jennings. Born in Kentucky on June 16, 1807, he established himself at Commerce, Illinois, when he was twenty years old. Three years later Dr. Isaac Galland invited him over to his new settlement to teach a school for three months. Jennings received lodging, fuel, furniture, and board at the Galland home as compensation, as well as the privilege of using the doctor's medical books. The School was opened early in October, 1830.

According to Jennings the first schoolhouse in Iowa, like all other buildings in that new country, was a log cabin "built of round logs, or 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."

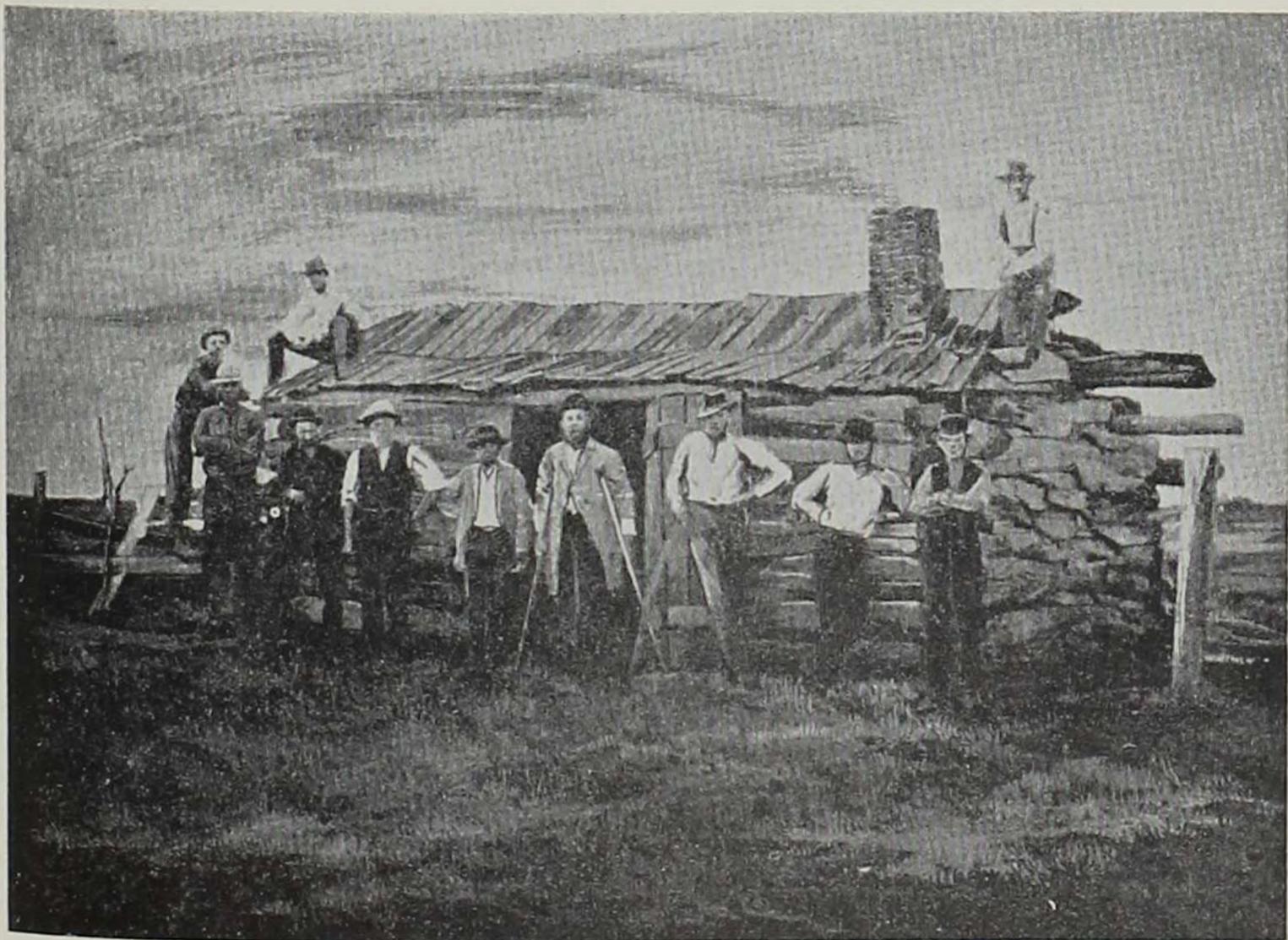
There were few books, while globes and maps were unheard of. Crude make-shift desks "fastened against the wall under the windows" afforded those "interested in learning the art of writing" an opportunity to stand up and practice. Reading, writing, and arithmetic probably constituted the curriculum.



*First Court House built in Napoleon, Johnson Co. 1838*

*From Aurner, Leading Events in Johnson County Iowa History (1912)*

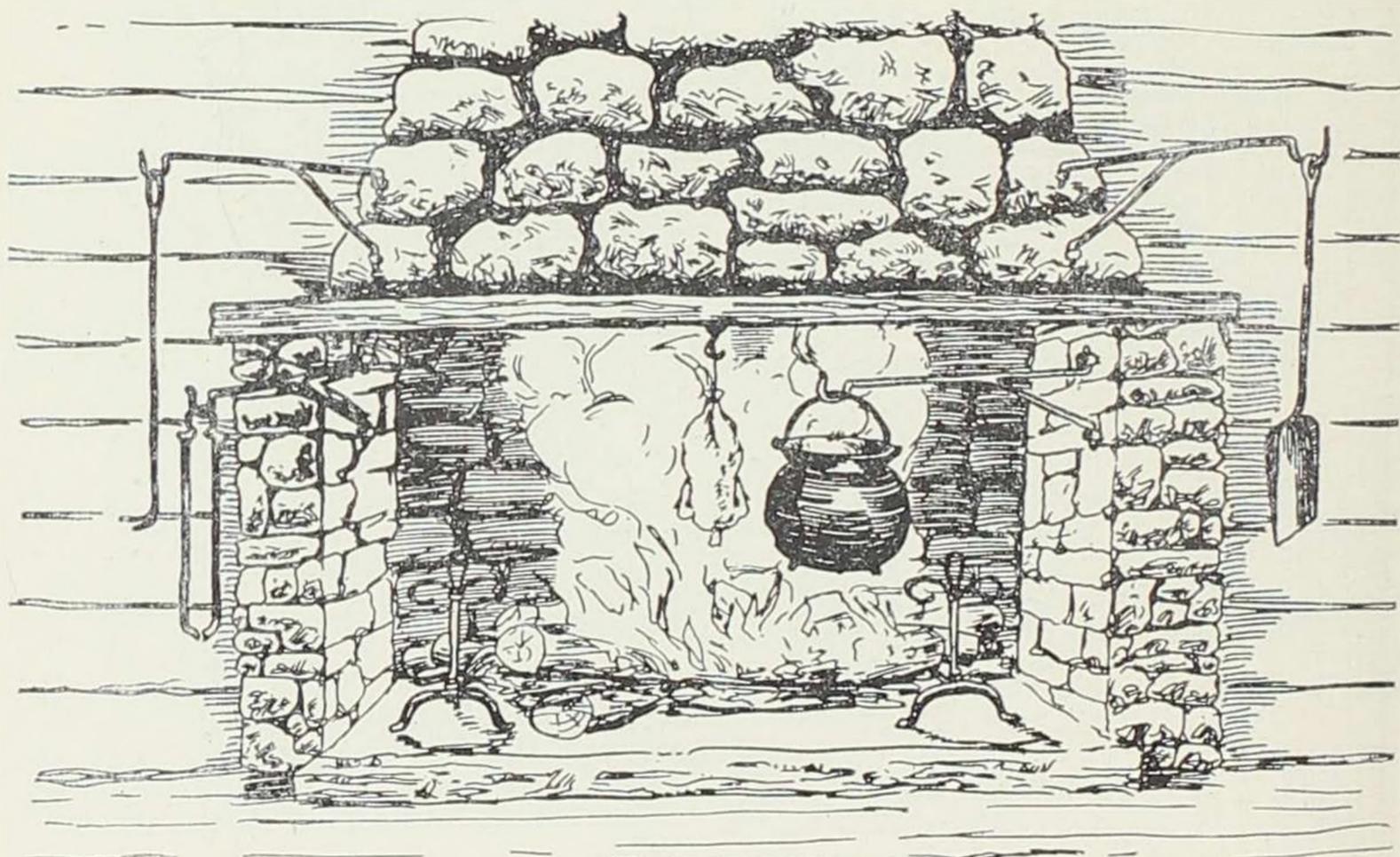
First Court House Built at Napoleon  
Johnson County — 1838



*From Perkins, History of O'Brien County (1897)*

First Court House in O'Brien County  
At Old O'Brien — 1860

AROUND THE FIREPLACE

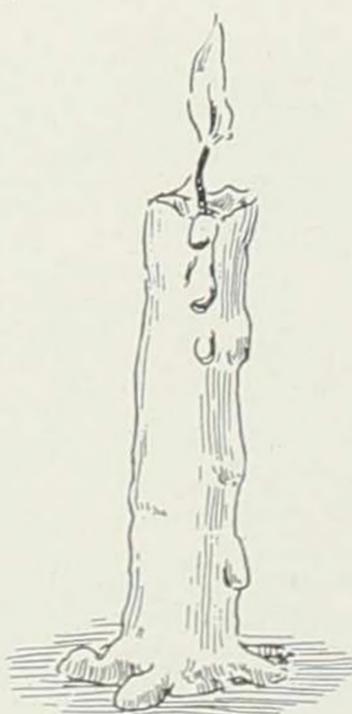


*From Cloz, Reminiscences of Newcastle*

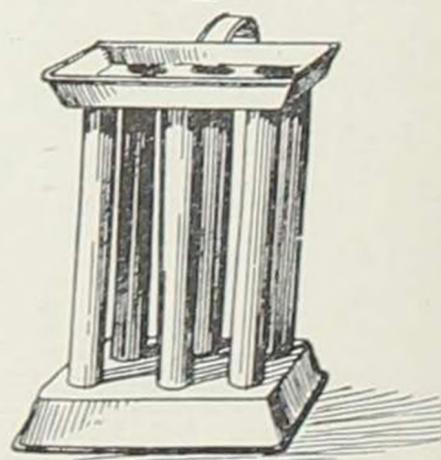
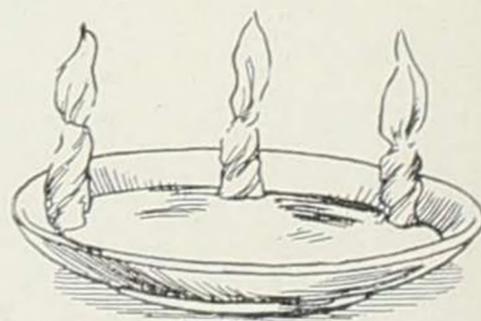
A fireplace of the 1850's



Saucer Light  
Turnip Light



Tallow Dip



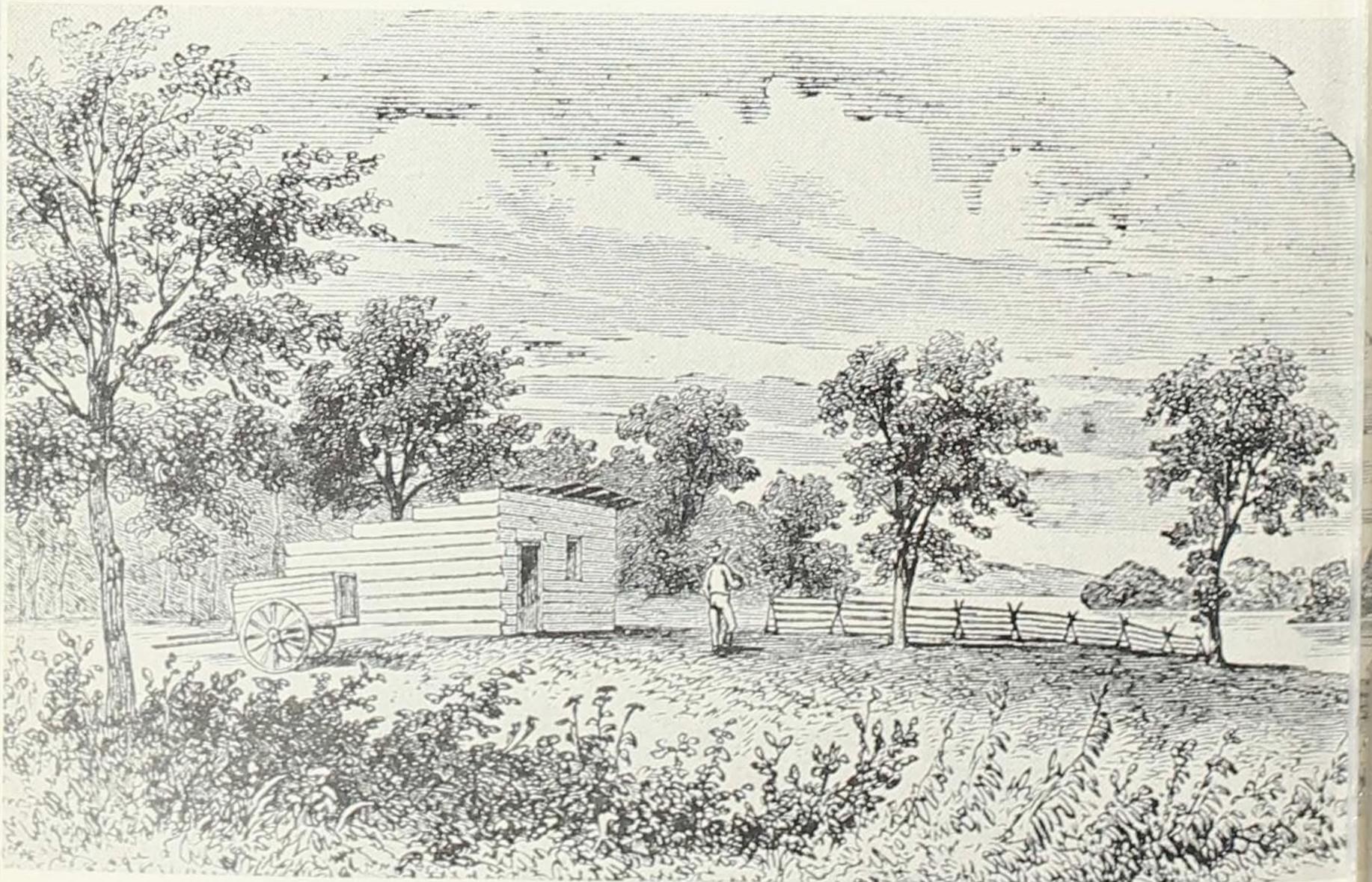
Saucer Light  
Candle Molds

*From Cloz, Reminiscences of Newcastle*

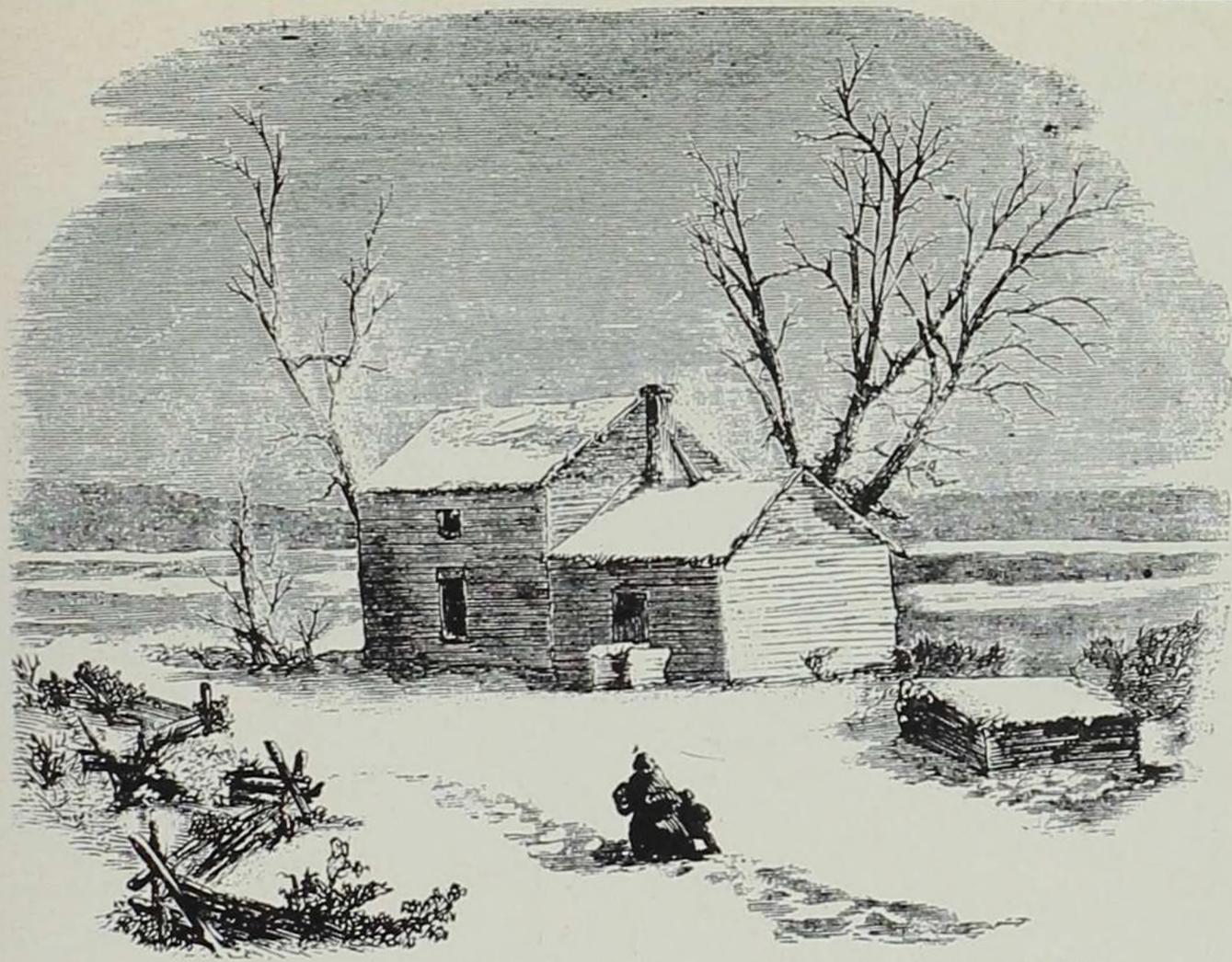




*From the State Historical Society Collections*  
Breaking Prairie in Pioneer Days



*From the State Historical Society Collections*  
First Home on the Prairie



THE OLD INDIAN AGENCY AT DES MOINES, IOWA.—[FROM A DAGUERROTYPÉ.]

### THE OLD INDIAN AGENCY AT DES MOINES, IOWA.

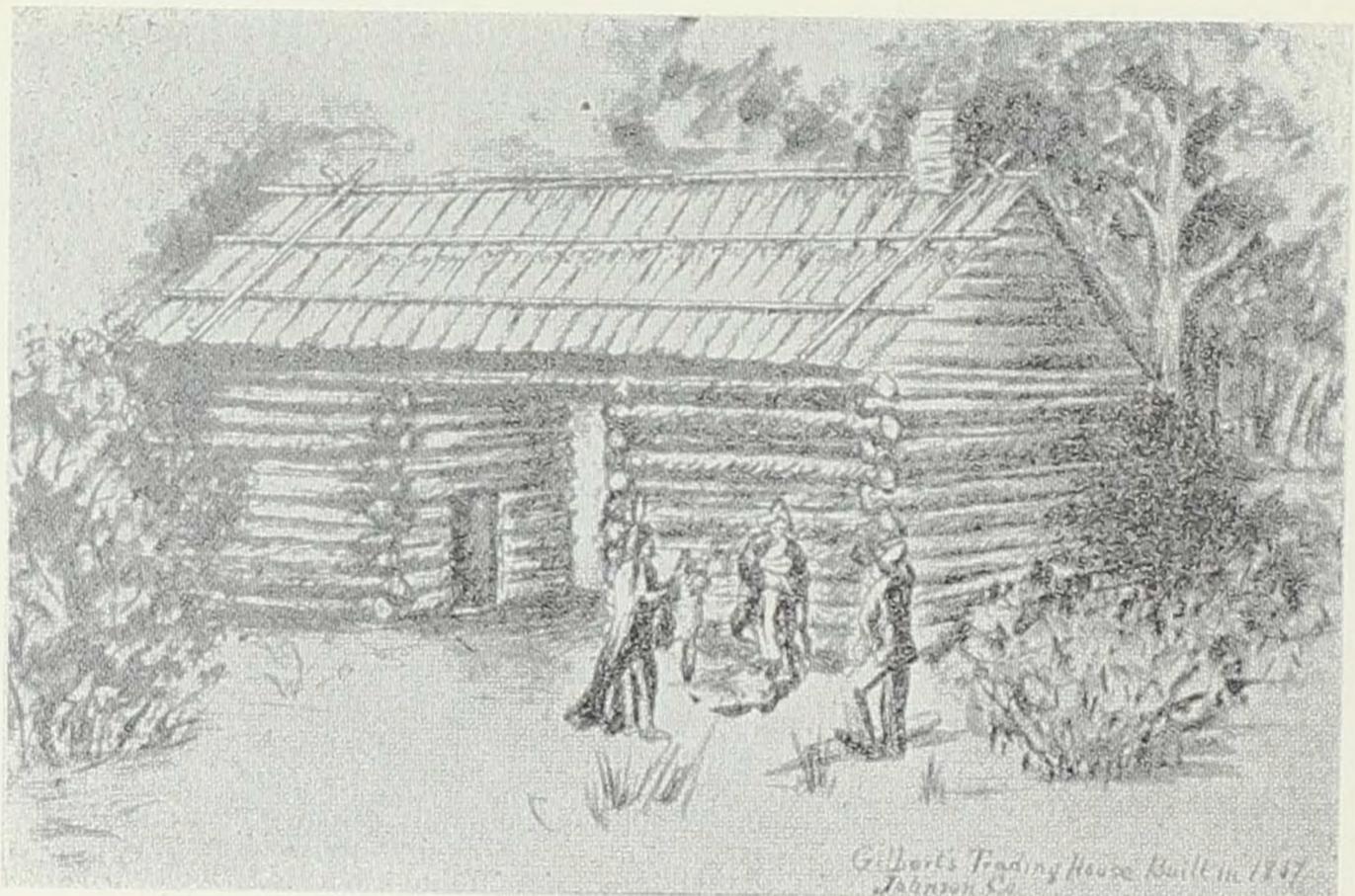
*“To the Editor of Harper’s Weekly:*

*DES MOINES, IOWA, January 16, 1861.*

“I SEND you, as a historical relic peculiar to the West, an ambrotype, by M. H. Bishard, of the old Indian Agency building, which is about to be torn down because it comes in the way of the extension of one of our streets. This building is a log-cabin of a ‘story and a half’ high, weather-boarded, and containing two rooms below and one above. Here all the business with the Indians was transacted during the three years intervening between the time of the treaty at Agency (which was near the western line of the first cession of land made by the Sac and Fox Indians after the Black Hawk war), when their remaining lands in Iowa were ceded to the general government, till their title expired.

“The house is now within the corporate limits of Des Moines, formerly Fort Des Moines, and stands about a mile from the city, at the southeastern limit of the grove in which it (the city) is located. It is situated on elevated ground, on the south side of the road leading to Iowa City, the former capital of the State, and faces to the northwest. The ground falls abruptly, just back of the building, a short distance, and then slopes to the shore of Spring Lake, beyond which the prairie extends eastward three miles to a belt of timber (the extreme back-ground of the picture), known as Four-Mile Timber, from a stream of that name along which it grows. The white streaks across the picture back of the house show the snow on the places where the fire last fall burned off the weeds and grass, whereby the snow is permitted to be seen in all its unflecked whiteness.

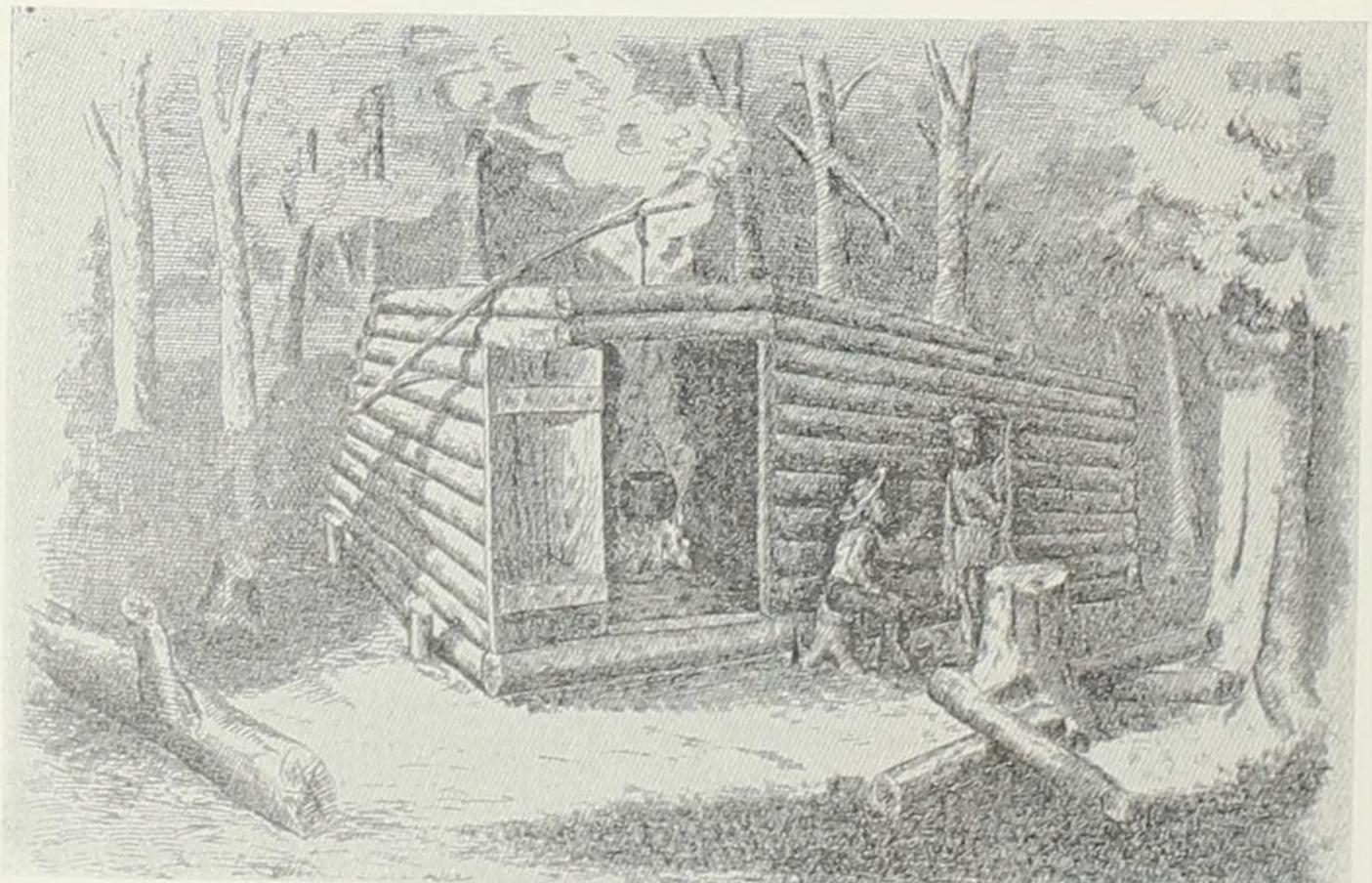
“Many of our citizens would be glad to see this relic embalmed in the pages of the *Weekly*, so that themselves and children in the future may be able to see the resemblance of one of the landmarks which bore so important a part in the early history of our city and the surrounding territory.”



*Gilbert's Trading House Built in 1837  
Johnson Co.*

*From Aurner, Leading Events in Johnson County Iowa History (1912)*

John Gilbert's Trading House  
Johnson County — 1837



*From Butterworth, The Growth of Industrial Art (1892)*

Primitive Log Cabin  
Showing Early Heating Method



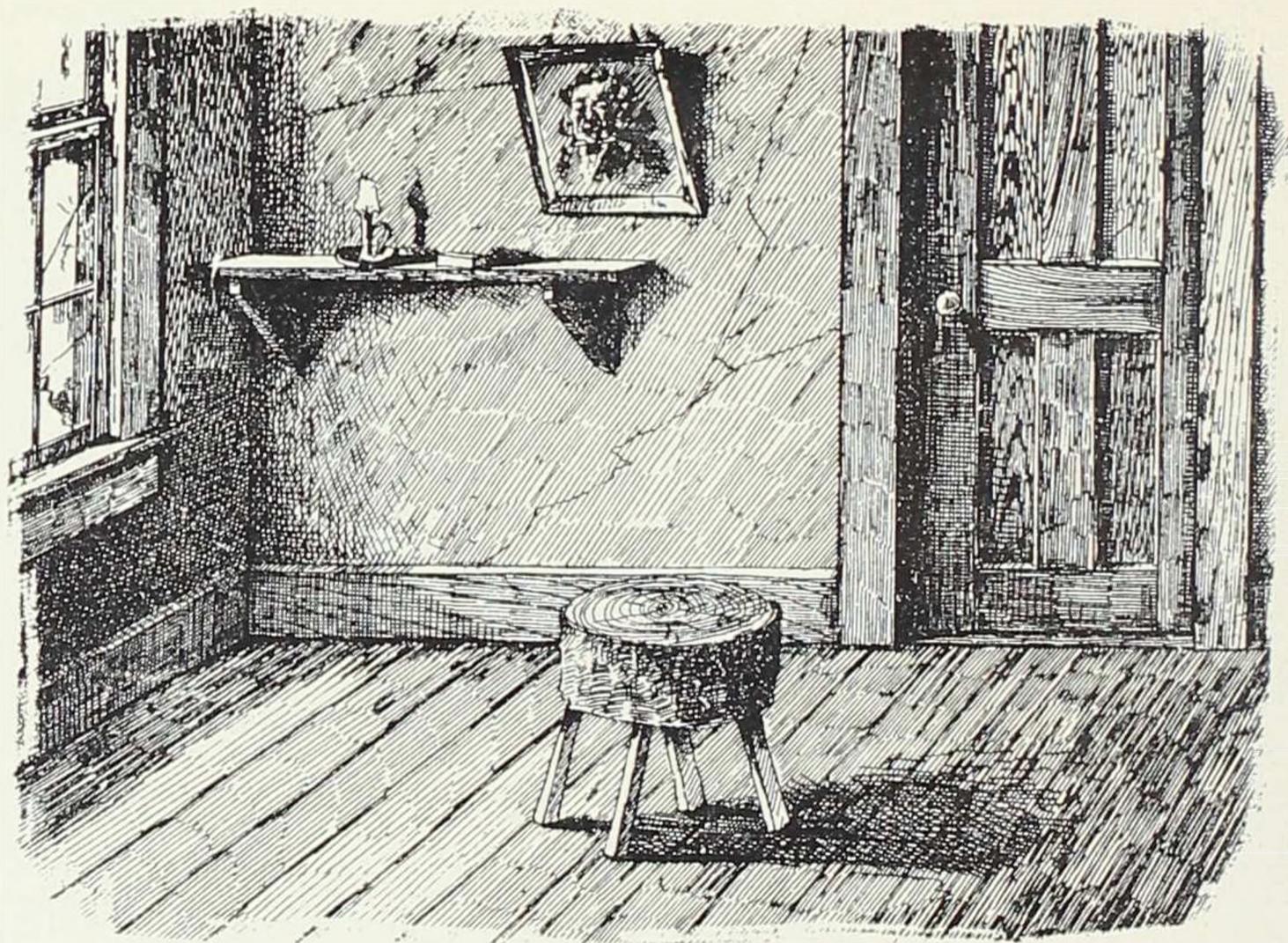
*From Perkins, History of O'Brien County (1897)*

Indians Preparing to Ambush Pioneer

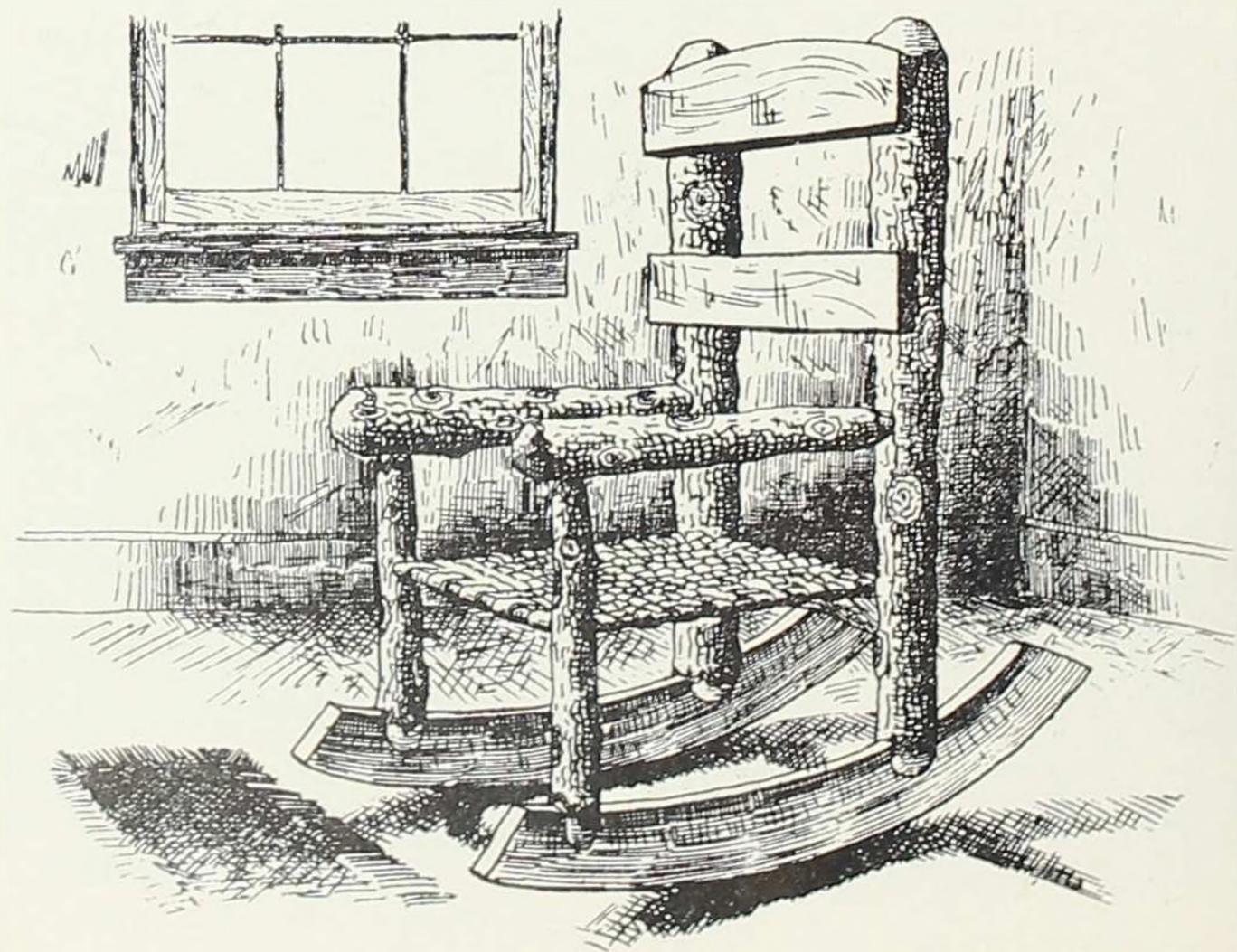


*From Butterworth, The Growth of Industrial Art (1892)*

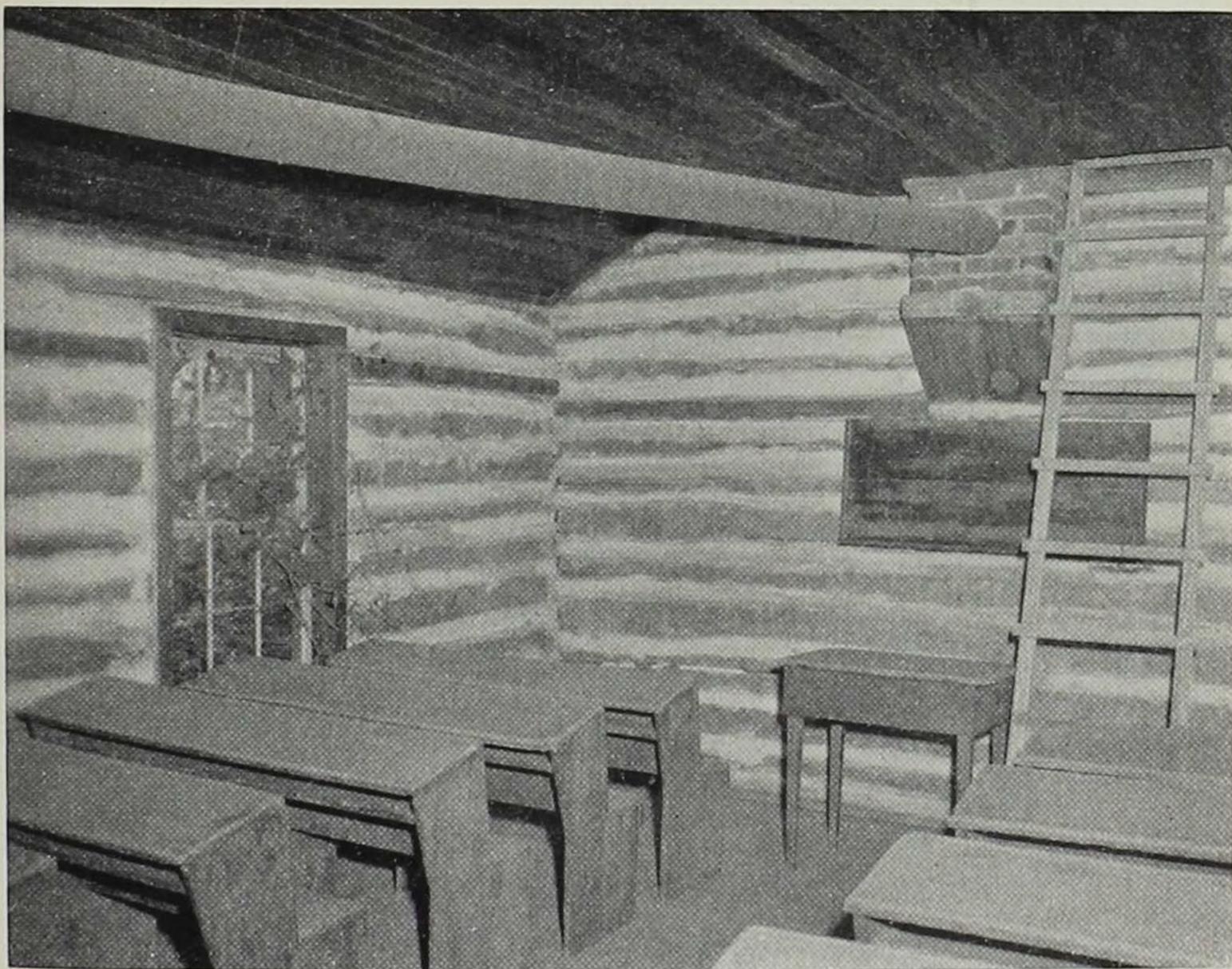
Corner Bed in Pioneer Home



*From Butterworth, The Growth of Industrial Art (1892)*  
Primitive Stool



*From Butterworth, The Growth of Industrial Art (1892)*  
Primitive Rocker



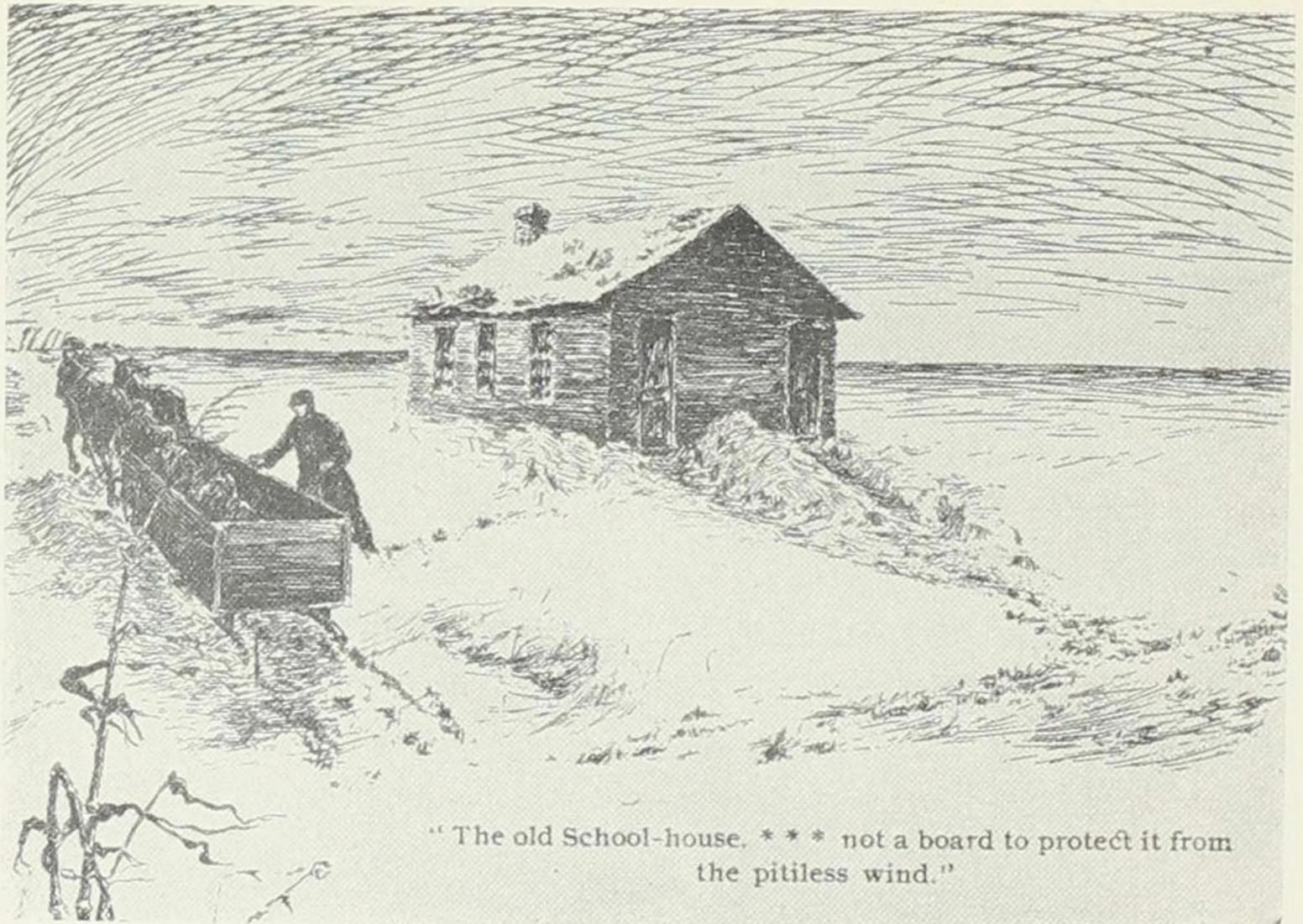
*Courtesy Luther College*

Interior of Norwegian Log Cabin School



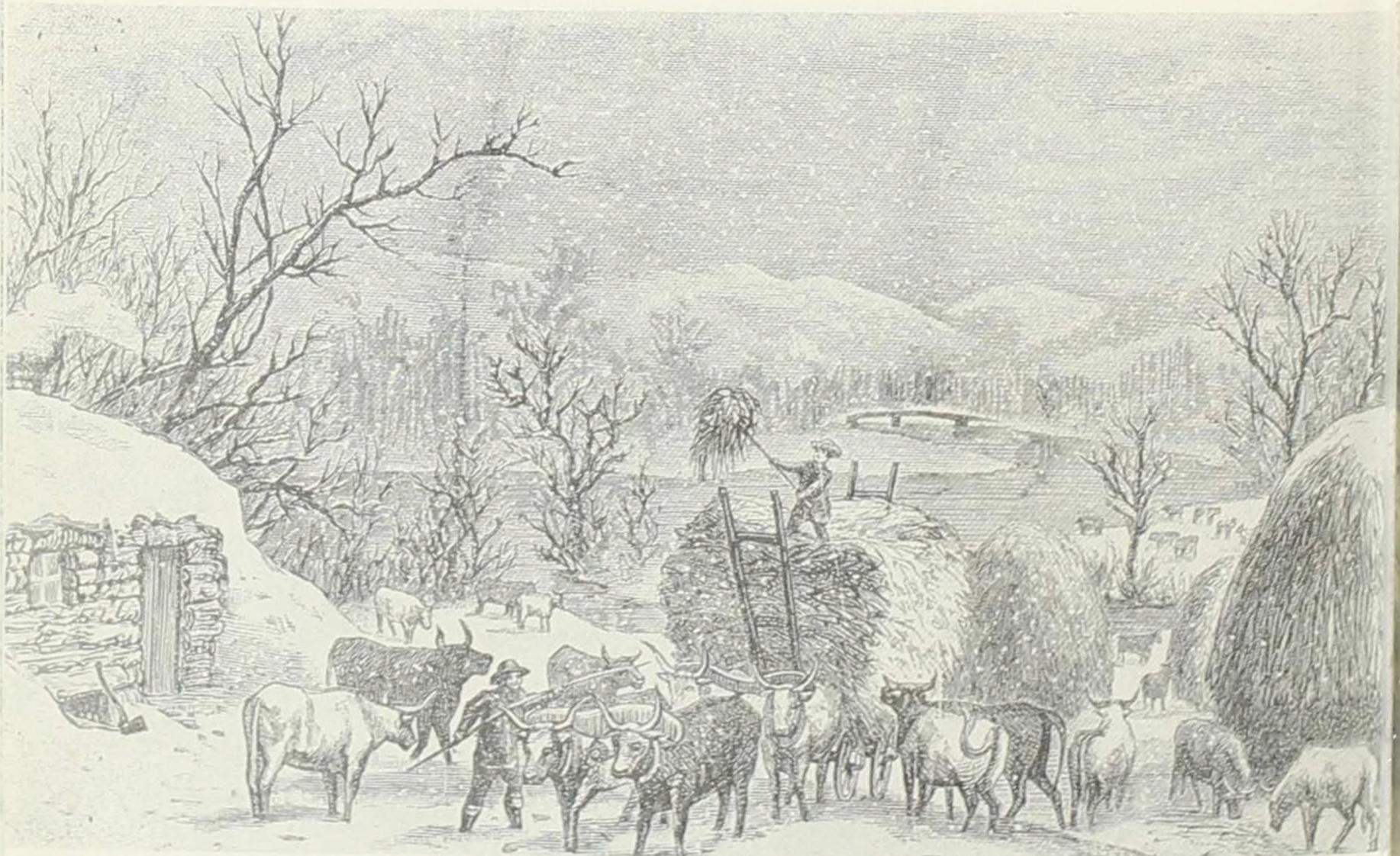
*Courtesy Luther College*

Norwegian Log Cabin at Decorah



"The old School-house. \* \* \* not a board to protect it from the pitiless wind."

*From the State Historical Society Collections*  
Pioneer School in Winter Time



*From the State Historical Society Collections*  
Winter Scene in Pioneer Days

main highways of western travel were likely to afford frequent shelter to the steady stream of covered wagon pioneers moving toward the setting sun. In his "History of Mahaska County" which appeared in the *Annals of Iowa* for January, 1869, Captain W. A. Hunter records:

Mr. Nichols lived at Brim's Point, about the spot where Kirksville now stands, Mr. Richard Parker on the McKinley farm, Mr. Canfield at the "Narrows," now Oskaloosa, and one settler at Black Oak Grove, name not recollected. These residences were all in the range of travel from east to west, and as there were no hotels in the country the travelers availed themselves of the hospitalities of these early settlers for food and shelter. As it would be natural to suppose, their houses were not the spacious mansions of which the country can now boast, but were single log cabins, just large enough for the accommodation of small families; but the early settlers of a country know too much about privations and the want of the actual necessaries of life, to say nothing of the luxuries, to turn away a hungry and weary man or beast. Mr. Nichols informs us that it was no unfrequent occurrence to see the floors of these cabins strewn all over with tired and weary western hunters; and as the houses named were the only ones in the country, they were very certain to catch all the travel. Having had some practical experience in frontier traveling, we can realize very clearly how those weary, westward-bound travelers enjoyed the luxury of these cabin hotels, and how eagerly the owners of them caught up every item of news from their guests.

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 axe 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 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.

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.”

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.

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.

The same story was reënacted 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 county officers had their offices in their own log houses.

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 housethief, 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 conducted the first store where merchandise was sold in Cherokee County.

The log cabin school was common in western Iowa as well as in the Black Hawk Purchase. In 1858 the first term of school in Cherokee County was taught by Mrs. Lemuel Parkhurst in her own log cabin. Her salary for the three-month school was \$55, paid by the home "colony" in Milford,

Massachusetts. Her pupils were Adeline, Luther, John and Henry Phipps; George, Clara and Thomas Brown, William Haynes, Mellen Holbrook and her own three children. Mrs. Parkhurst later recalled one familiar school song, the chorus of which was:

Our lands they are broad enough, don't be alarmed!  
For Uncle Sam is rich enough, he'll give us all a farm.

Four years later, in 1862, the Homestead Act was passed and settlers in Cherokee County and all Iowa were thereafter able to stake out claims, make improvements, and obtain their land free.

George W. Lebourveau, a member of the Milford Colony bound for Cherokee County, recalls the privations endured and the accommodations afforded as his group traveled across Iowa.

From Eldora we journeyed on westward until we came to Skunk Grove, Hamilton County, now called Rose Grove. We traveled five miles in a drenching rain storm, in mud a foot and more deep — some places there seemed to be no bottom; one wagon got fast in a "slew," the bottom of which no man ever fathomed, even unto this day! Leaving the wagon there over night, we all remained in a shanty 10 x 12 feet. We met Robert Perry, "Gus" Kirchner and Henry Brockshienk, who told us about the Little Sioux River. Our next stopping place was Webster City; from this place George Kay sent a letter back East, dated "four miles beyond Sundown and seven beyond the knowledge of God!" We left Albert Phipps, Slayton and Haynes with one team and a portion of our goods. They remained there until some time in June. The balance of the company came on with our goods to Fort Dodge,

where we put up at the largest hotel in the place—a double log structure, more noted for solidity than for extreme beauty! It was kept by a German named Shaifner. There were two rows of beds made on the floor, with scant room to go between. There was a man there with some money with which to enter land and he wanted a room by himself and the landlord told him, "Yah, you gits him." The beds were then all full, and he took him to one corner. "There your room." But the stranger guest said "No, I have considerable money by me." "*Money!* how much you gots?" He told him \$500, whereupon the landlord said: "Oh, every pody gots more money as that—throw him down here any vare, no pody steals him, but if you gots a bottle of whisky, look out for him, for some one steals him before morning!" I will remark the last statement proved true, as was revealed by the early morning light!

Mr. Van Epps had hauled the lumber for their new home from Cherokee and when his wife arrived on September 12, 1872, she found that the fourteen by eighteen foot home had been built of twelve foot post 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 a 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."

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.

Saloons, or grocery stores, were common on every frontier. In June of 1836 Captain John Litch, from Newburyport, New Hampshire, erected the pioneer whiskey shop on Scott County soil. A seafaring man, full of anecdotes, and jovial in disposition, Captain Litch was ready "to toss off a glass of grog" with anyone desiring to join him. His 16 x 20-foot log cabin stood on Front Street below the subsequent site of Burnell, Gillet & Company mill. The cost of material and labor for building this grog shop appears as follows in the Captain's account book.

June 30, 1836. — Paid Hampton for logs, &c., ....	\$112 00
Paid for nails and sundries, .....	5 00

For raising 8 logs, 6 beams and sleepers, .....	24 00
Lime and hauling rock, .....	12 00
Lumber of Shoals & Eldridge, (Capt. Shoals and D. C. Eldridge,) .....	14 44
Lumber of Capt. Clark, .....	24 93
Carpenters and Joiners, .....	63 50
Nails and <i>liquor</i> , .....	10 00
Shingles, glass, sash and clear stuff, .....	29 47
Underpinning and painting, whitewashing, &c.,	11 00
Locks, butts and screws, .....	3 11
Horse-rack and sawing corners of cabin, ....	6 00
Digging cellar, planking and timber, .....	19 05
	<hr/>
Cost of the first whisky shop, .....	\$386 00

Other entries from Captain Litch's account, or log book, shed light on the cost of living in 1836.

Nov. 16. — R. H. Dr. to 4 glasses of whisky, 25 cents, 4 lbs. salt 12 cts., .....	37
To 2 glasses whisky, 12 cts., crackers and herring, 12, .....	25
Dec. 3. — To 2 mackerel, 25 cts., 1 pt. whisky, 12½ cts., .....	37½
To 1 quart whisky, 25c., tobacco 12½c., .....	37½
J. M. Cr. by 1 bbl. flour, .....	\$13 00
By three days' work, \$1 per day, .....	3 00
Dr. to 4 barrels of lime, \$1.50 per bbl., .....	6 00
June 3, 157. — Mr. E —	Dr.
To 73 muskrat at 22 cts., 4 minks 25c., .....	\$16 00
To 1 fisher skin, 1 wolf, 1 badger, and 1 coon skin, 22 cts. each, .....	88
Cr. by 2 bush. corn, at \$1.25 per bush., .....	2 50

Willard Barrows, of Davenport, has left an indelible picture of Captain Litch in his history of

Scott County, published by the State Historical Society, in its *Annals of Iowa* in 1863:

The eccentric Captain dealt in almost anything and everything that came along, as may be seen by his "log book" from the fine furs of the beaver and the otter, down to the wolf and polecat. In the provision line, he kept everything that could be had from pork and flour down to pumpkins and turnips; but the great attraction, however, the great leading article, was whisky. The Captain too, had such a nice, peculiar way of making the "critter" palatable by various other ingredients, that his punches, cobblers, julips and cocktails, all made from whisky, were much sought after; and his store became the resort of not only those who wished to purchase the necessaries of life, but the professional man, the politician, the claim speculator, the old discharged soldier and the Indian, all met here upon one common level, and talked over all matters of interest, under the balmy influence of the Captain's good cheer. His was the only store, tavern, saloon or public place of entertainment in the town or country, and was as much, perhaps to many, a resort of necessity as a place to quench thirst. Captain Litch died on the 5th of March, 1841, aged 55 years, with the stigma of having planted the first whisky-shop upon the soil of Scott county.

The lumbermen were busy on Cherokee County's last log cabin 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 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."

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."

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 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.

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 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."

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.

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 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.

In maintaining an old log cabin or building a new one, a community must decide whether its log cabin is to symbolize the typical log cabin of frontier days or become a museum and catch all for anything that is offered. If it is to symbolize the pioneer log cabin, it is important to restrict

the materials contained therein to the pioneer period. The danger is always present that the log cabin will be cluttered with material of the late Victorian or 20th Century period which will be completely out of place and will prevent the cabin from becoming a worthwhile educational device for both children and grownups.

On the other hand, in the event a community elects to sponsor a museum log cabin, it is definitely not wise to include old manuscripts, documents, photographs, and fugitive irreplaceable material in it. Because of the very nature of the structure, a log cabin is a fire hazard that can readily and quickly burn down with a consequent destruction of all its contents. The documents revealing the story of the community and the state should be deposited in a fireproof structure like the State Historical Society of Iowa Centennial Building in Iowa City. Here, the documents and records may be properly preserved, consulted, and later shared through publication with readers throughout Iowa and the Nation.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN