

Pioneering in Iowa*

My first real memory of the Iowa prairies is vivid and sweet. It is of the days in May, 1869, when the breaking-plow gang was at work to turn the virgin soil in preparation for cultivation. The plow was drawn by three yoke of oxen driven by a man who walked to the side and forward, cracking a long whip and giving loud and continuous commands to the oxen. On the beam of the plow was a tool box, and the man who held the plow allowed me to sit on this box from morning till night. This was one of the greatest joy rides of my life.

To this day I can hear the ringing, crackling sound of the continuous cutting of tough roots, I can see the solid slice of soil about twenty inches wide roll over gracefully in a continuous fold, I can see and smell the May flora which covered that soil like a blanket in exquisite array of colors, I can re-experience the strain of the beasts against the plow and the plow against the resistant soil.

I felt myself in command of the prairie, the plow, the oxen, and the workmen. The memory

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of those days comes to me with a glow and always comes to mind when I lecture on the resources, vividness, and persistence of mental imagery. Here, possibly for the first time, I was impressed with the grandeur in nature, the joy of conquering, the mastery of natural resources, and a feeling of awe bordering on the sublime. What play days these were for the young boy — playing all day, associated with powerful men and animals, with the thrill of satisfaction in seeing things done on a large scale. This in many respects was an introduction to the countless experiences of the grandeur in pioneer life. It was play at its best; the joy of conquest.

This pioneering experience of life on the challenging prairie was my first and unforgettable lesson in asking questions of nature by the progressive method in nature's kindergarten. It was the beginning of a life of exploration and investigation. I was then three years old.

My father, Carl Gustav Seashore (Seashore being a literal translation of the Swedish *Sjöstrand*) and my mother, Charlotta, bringing me and my one-year-old sister, Emma, had arrived from Sweden early that spring after a six-weeks' voyage across the ocean during which time my sister and I both had the measles. The last eighteen miles of our trip were made with an ox team.

Our destination was the future farm in Grant Township, Boone County, Iowa, the pioneer home-to-be. The 80-acre farm had been judiciously selected by my uncle, Alfred Seashore, who had preceded us to the same locality. There the pioneer life immediately began with plans for the cultivation of the soil and the building of a house. The original siding is still on the house which stands on the top of a hill overlooking an ideal plot of Iowa farm land.

The next fourteen years on the physical frontier in Iowa were eventful in my education; full of opportunities, ventures, and thrills. I saw and had a hand in the turning of the wild prairie plot into a well-appointed homestead. It was a simple life, close to nature in all her wealth, hardships, and economies. In this frontier with but little capital to invest, we had to learn self-help and the art of making a self-supporting unit from resources at hand. As a boy, I had to learn to do everything that could and should be done in home-building — sowing and reaping, feeding and breeding, branding and butchering, breaking horses and opening markets, planting trees and grafting them, knitting and candle dipping, music and handicrafts in family, social, educational, and religious life, all calling for initiative, forethought, ingenuity, and economy — a great school.

It was hard work. There was little or no machinery. I recall the primitive scythe, with its grain cradle. I started to plow when I had to reach up instead of down to grip the plow handle and could not lift the plow at the corners but had to train the horses to turn it correctly. To the barefoot boy, the soft smooth furrow stretching across the field was a magic carpet. I early set the pace for the hired man at work. Vacations were unheard of. There was no time or companion for the city kind of play. Everybody worked hard, early to rise and early to bed.

We had to fight grasshoppers with kerosene, we had to patrol the seeded ground against the clouds of game birds — ducks, geese, cranes, swans, and prairie chickens — which were pests because they would pick up the sprouting wheat and corn and at times darkened the sky like a cloud. Snowstorms were a serious menace on the treeless and wind-swept expanse. I rode horseback one whole night lost in a cold blizzard. At one time we had to dig a tunnel between the house and the cattle shed. Prairie fires were a dreadful threat. I have seen a cloud-like gigantic torch advancing at tornado speed toward our prairie-grass surroundings. Clearings and backfire were our protection; yet at one time I saw the flames jump this and set fire to our woodpile. Snakes

and other pests were rife, a menace to the bare-foot boy who went around with a hoe trying to eradicate them.

There was at first no school, no church, no communal life — all had to be built up. But we were healthy, hardy, and brave, and the mastery of each hardship had the promise of victory.

The rich black loam of Iowa responded and led to productive farming, and we were grateful to say that "it always rains in Iowa before it is too late" and that "if it does not go very well, it will go very well anyhow."

The rich heritage which our family had carried from the eugenic stock in Sweden with health, morals, practical wisdom, and religion was transplanted in a fast-growing community of immigrants from the same section in the mother country. Father stood out among them as a master builder and leader in all that was good. He built the schoolhouse with his own hands and became its first director. To facilitate acquisition of the English language in our family, we boarded the school teacher. Father built a church with his own hands and became its first preacher. He planted trees for a park as a center for community picnics. In the meantime much responsibility was thrown upon his oldest son on the farm and in the home.

"In retrospect," as I have said in my autobiography, "my boyhood education was of a primitive sort, meager in formal book learning, but rich and powerful in the challenge to cope with big situations. The freedom for vegetating in out-of-door responsible activities of rich and varied interests was a valuable substitute for pressure in brain work in a formal school training and confinement. Ours was a prolonged kindergarten set in reality with necessity as a teacher."

The physical frontiers have passed. It is now conventional to speak of other frontiers, many of which embody the same elements of pioneer life. My more than forty years in an active learned career in Iowa have been spent at a mental frontier, breaking ground for the new science of psychology. As an introduction to my account of the pioneering in psychology I speak of these early experiences at the physical frontier because as I look back upon my life, there is a very close parallel between these experiences at the physical frontier and those at a virgin mental frontier.

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