

THE PALIMPSEST

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Grandmother's Story

The revival of knitting during the World War produced other good results besides warm sweaters and socks for the soldiers. Grandmothers, who had helped spin wool into yarn and knit the yarn into stockings for the various members of the family back in the early days of Iowa history, took up their needles with alacrity and as their swift stitches grew into beautifully knitted articles they became reminiscent of those pioneer times.

My little brown-eyed grandmother, Mary Elizabeth Lyon, was very happy to knit for the Red Cross, and I, being her brown-eyed namesake, received the benefit of her early experiences while she plied her busy needles.

“Tell me, Grandma, about your coming to Iowa”, I urged, one evening, as she was rounding off the heel of a gray sock. “I heard you talking about it yesterday and I didn't get the whole story.”

“It is a long story,” said grandmother, mechanically counting the stitches on one needle, “and I hardly know where to begin.” So she began with her childhood, and this is the story she told.

Back in Muskingum County, Ohio, there were a good many of us related people. It must have been about 1850, when I tried to enumerate my relatives, but there were so many uncles, aunts, and cousins, both on the side of my father, the Willises, and of my mother, the Stenghers, that my six-year-old brain could not complete the task. You see, the reason there were so many of us was that my mother had four married sisters while my father, Robert Willis, had five. These families, all living in the same neighborhood, made a considerable clan. How we cousins — Willises, Zinbelmans, Johnsons, Crawfords, Dunns, and a whole lot of others — used to enjoy playing in Grandfather Willis’s old barn.

“Grandfather,” I asked one day as I sat on his lap, “why do you have only one eye?”

Mother tried to keep me quiet, because it was very impolite for a little girl to ask such personal questions of her somewhat austere elders. But grandfather seemed willing to speak of his disfigurement. I can’t remember all the details, but he told how he had served in the War of 1812, of the difficult march across Ohio to Detroit under General William Hull, of the siege of Malden, and finally how the men were led from their camp in Detroit and marched

all day by circuitous paths through the woods and over the hills. At every turn they expected to be ordered to form in line and charge the British. Every nerve was strained — every man ready — when lo, coming to a clearing they beheld their own fortifications surmounted by a white flag. Not a blow had been struck in defense! Not a soldier had had an opportunity to help prevent such a disgraceful surrender! With curses and jeers the men broke ranks when they realized they had been tricked. In the general excitement the man nearest Grandfather Willis suddenly raised his bayonet and accidentally hit grandfather in the eye. After weary months in a hospital he came back to Ohio permanently disabled. Eventually the government rewarded him for his services — not in money, but in land warrants.

We heard much of the great, unoccupied prairie region of the Iowa country. Many people from Adamsville and Zanesville were moving there, over the Cumberland Road. On the day I asked about grandfather's eye he told my mother he was anxious for her and Robert to have a better start. "I want him to take my land warrants," he said, "go to Iowa, and take up the land."

A shade came over mother's face, for she dreaded to leave all her beloved relatives behind. My father, however, felt that this was a splendid idea, and in a few months he made a trip to Iowa and returned with such glowing accounts that not only our family

but most of the immediate relatives soon sold their homes, loaded their goods into wagons, and started for Iowa.

That was in the spring of 1852. The colony travelled very comfortably, though not rapidly, across Ohio, Indiana, and a part of Illinois. Desiring to strike the Mississippi at Keokuk they left the Cumberland Road, and came across country by whatsoever roads or trails they could find, fording streams, wading through mud, and enduring untold hardships. I remember the great bows of the old ox-drawn wagon, and can feel yet the lurch and chug of the big wheels, as they struck the ruts and hummocks along the way.

Usually mother drove a part of each day, thus letting father walk behind, while brother William rode our faithful horse, Jim, and drove old "Spot" and "Whitey" and the young cattle which we were bringing to our new home. There were three of us children old enough to run along behind or ride Jim and we took turns in herding our live stock, which frequently paused to graze by the wayside.

Once, shortly before we reached Keokuk, there was a terrible downpour of rain which delayed us for several days. Pushing on through the deep, black mud of Illinois, we finally came to drowned land that seemed scarcely passable. As our team was in the lead, father urged his oxen on. "Get up, Buck! Go long, Dime!" he coaxed, and with final application of the ox goad he bravely sought to

cross the swamp. Buck and Dime did their best — but at last, puffing and panting, they stopped dead still.

The wagon was hub deep in the mire, there was no dry land near, and the wagons behind were too far away to help us escape. Father crept out on the wagon tongue, unyoked the oxen, and headed them back to the edge of the swamp. Mother, with the baby in her arms, mounted old Jim, William crept up behind her, while sister Nan and I each climbed on father's shoulders — for by this time he had waded in up to his knees. "Go on, Jim, pull us out," he said, as he grasped old Jim's tail. Jim seemed to know he was saving the family, for with great care he threaded his way back to firm ground. Another horse was taken from one of the other teams and he and Jim pulled the heavy wagon out, backwards.

When we reached the Mississippi we waited our turn to be ferried across to Keokuk. To our childish eyes, the sight of the great, seething mass of water brought terror indeed. Father and mother spoke so reassuringly, however, and even the animals walked on to the boat so calmly that our fears subsided.

Our family stayed two years in Louisa County but my father felt that the land must be richer away from the river, so he went to investigate north central Iowa before he invested grandfather's land warrants. In Hamilton County he located land for himself along White Fox Creek in Cass Township.

He also preëmpted several other farms for relatives who had money as well as warrants to invest. A farm that sold for sixty thousand dollars just before the war boom was one that he took up from the government for my grandmother Stengher.

I remember well his preparations for that trip — how mother looked after every button on his coat, and how she sewed a peculiar band inside his shirt. In this was stitched the money with which the relatives who had no land warrants wished him to pay for their land.

Late one cold day in March, 1854, we arrived at Newcastle, now Webster City, and pushed on as rapidly as possible in hope of reaching the log cabin up on White Fox Creek, which was to be our new home. How anxiously we children scanned the unbroken prairies, looking for that log hut! The roads were muddy and Buck Creek was very high, so we had to leave our goods on the bank that night. The family with a few conveniences were successfully ferried across on old Jim, however, and by dint of walking and carrying many bundles, we made the last two miles of our journey on foot.

But alas for our high expectations! The log cabin was utterly desolate, and it gave ample evidence of having been used as a stable, rather than a human dwelling place. Small wonder that my mother, remembering the pretty little white house back in Ohio, sat down and wept.

But pioneer women spent little time in crying and

mother soon had a fire going. Somehow we got settled. The old hut was made cheerful by being papered with clean newspapers. We children went to the woods, dug up gooseberry bushes, and planted them in neat rows. How much good we got from those old bushes! We started a wild plum grove near the house, and father had some young apple trees sent from Louisa County.

Mr. P. W. Lee, now one of the substantial citizens of Webster City, says that the first apple he ever saw or ate was one I gave to him when he and his father, J. W. Lee, came to visit us. His father was our school master, who had come from Ohio with us and whom we held in high esteem, and it is probable that I plucked some of the first fruit of our young trees to give to little "Willie".

But the greatest event I can remember of our early life on White Fox Creek was the first fair held in Hamilton County. As I said before, we brought old Spot and Whitey from Ohio, and they and their offspring furnished us with milk and butter. Down under the bank of the creek was a shelving rock, beneath which a wonderfully cool spring flowed. Here my mother managed to keep the milk and butter cool even in the heat of summer. In the fall of 1857 every one was urged to exhibit products at the fair and I can see yet the roll of butter, daintily marked and as smooth as marble, that mother sent to the fair. She won first prize on it, too.

The next year news came of an Indian uprising.

With the terror of the Spirit Lake massacre vividly in mind mother and we children hastily grabbed a few belongings, packed a basket of food, and father took us in the wagon to Webster City. From there a regular train of wagons, loaded mostly with women and children, started for Boonesboro. Father returned to our home, determined to defend it.

The party got as far as Hook's Point, now Stratford, where darkness compelled a halt. There was no shelter save one cabin, so the wagons were drawn into a circle, a fire built, and everybody sat up and talked all night. The following morning messengers came bearing the good news that the alarm was false, and so the whole company turned around and reached home that night, tired but safe.

"And did you find your father was all right?" I asked.

"Yes indeed," smiled grandmother, as she folded her knitting. "We all ran and grabbed him, fairly weeping with joy. It meant so much to us that father was safe, and that this Iowa home was safe too, for we had just found out that we loved our new home in this great new State of Iowa. So Mary, you see that because your great-great-grandfather lost his eye at Detroit, you were born a Hawkeye instead of a Buckeye."

BESSIE L. LYON