

In Quest of a Prairie Home

On a day in June, 1837, a weary caravan of nine covered wagons, followed by a drove of tired and foot-sore cattle, arrived in Henry County, Iowa, in the neighborhood of what is now the quaint old Quaker town of Salem. Having left their homes in the well-settled regions of northern Indiana, this band of Quaker emigrants had crossed the Mississippi and entered the Iowa country — the “most magnificent dwelling place prepared by God for the abode of man”.

Among these courageous Quaker pioneers were my great-great-great-grandfather, Nathan Cook, and his eldest son, Jonathan. Soon after their arrival in Henry County there came into the home of Jonathan Cook a baby girl who was given the name of Lydia Eleanor. And it was this dainty little Quakeress who some twenty years later took the marriage vows with Milton Y. Moore, a young schoolmaster from Ohio.

In the year 1860 my grandmother, Mary, was born into the family of Lydia Eleanor and Milton Moore as their first child. And this is the story of her early life.

My babyhood was spent in Salem during the troubled days when that little Quaker town was one of

the chief stations on the main line of the Underground Railroad. Indeed, the town of Salem was so near the Missouri boundary, and its inhabitants were so active in the cause of aiding fugitive slaves, that even the little children were disciplined in the solemn business of never asking or answering questions. Grandfather Jonathan Cook disapproved of this secrecy, and was one of a group who withdrew from the Salem Monthly Meeting to form a Meeting of their own called "Abolition Friends".

During the Civil War grandfather Thomas Moore joined the "Graybeard" regiment and saw active service; but father, rejected on account of his health, was not permitted to go. Before the end of the war my father, Milton Moore, equipped a covered wagon and with his family started out on the first of four journeys in quest of a home on the prairies of Iowa. Father was a typical pioneer, ever ready to move on to a new frontier. Mother, too, must have shared with him that restless westward-moving spirit, for father always said that whenever he wanted to move he had only to tell mother of his plans and she was ready and willing to go.

Leaving the Quaker settlement in Henry County, our family journeyed northward to Linn County where we lived for a few years. My memories of Linn County are associated with Springville and later with Viola, where at the age of seven I attended Mrs. Lizzie Leonard's school. During the first week of the term the schoolhouse burned down, and classes

were held in empty box cars until the damage could be repaired.

What it was that led father to equip again a covered wagon and start out with his growing family in search of a new home, I was too young to understand. I only know that our next stopping place was at Hawleyville, about seven miles northeast of Clarinda in Page County.

Hawleyville was the oldest village in Page County, having grown up around James M. Hawley's store — a frontier trading center for a region within a radius of twenty miles. When the railroad finally came, the hopefully platted village of Hawleyville was passed by and what was once a brisk pioneer trading point survived only as a small hamlet on the east bank of the East Nodaway River. It was a lovely spot in those early days; and I can understand how mother, who loved the birds and trees and flowers, must have enjoyed her sojourn in this beautiful valley.

When I was about eleven years old there came another day of great excitement when father announced that he had traded our home in Hawleyville for a quarter-section of raw land in Hancock County, three miles from the town of Britt. An inviting description written by some Hancock County officers was all the information he had concerning his newly acquired land. Lured by the tales of better and newer land, he was ready to set out in quest of the ever-receding paradise of the frontiersman. And

so, for the third time, we embarked in a prairie schooner to cross the great green sea of the Iowa prairie.

Little did we realize, as we journeyed from Henry County to Linn, then from Linn to Page, and finally from Page County to Hancock, that we were reënacting, in the short period of eight years and on the more limited stage of the Iowa prairies, the great drama of the western movement of the American pioneer as he journeyed from the region east of the Alleghenies to western Pennsylvania and Ohio, thence to Indiana and Illinois, and then on again to the Iowa country.

The preparation for this third journey was a time of thrilling anticipation for my two sisters, my brother, and myself. Any kind of a covered wagon was at that time commonly called a "prairie schooner"; but the wagon which carried us from Page to Hancock County was not the Conestoga wagon with its curved-bottom, boat-shaped wagon box. Ours was the more lightly built Yankee wagon — a low, long-coupled, straight-box, two-horse wagon, made roomy and comfortable by an extension of the wagon bed over the wheels.

In the lower part of the wagon were fitted the boxes into which were packed our household goods. I remember that mother's little cane-seated rocker, our family pictures and books, one bureau, and a jar of honey were among the things packed in the wagon. On top of the feed box at the back of the

wagon was hooked a small green table upside down. This table held the cooking utensils, the dinner box, the stove rack used for campfire cooking, and two splint-bottom chairs. We four children rode behind while father and mother occupied a spring seat in the front of the wagon. In the daytime the canvas which covered the wagon was usually rolled up to allow us to see the country through which we passed. Once we stopped at the home of some friends and found them living in a cabin made entirely of prairie sod.

Leaving the fruitful valley of the East Nodaway River, we soon found ourselves out on the open prairie which we learned to love during the weeks we travelled across it. I can see now the two tracks of the road, cut deep by the wagon wheels and washed out by the rains. The passing clouds cast shadows on the tall, wind-blown grass; and the myriads of autumn flowers beckoned to us on every side.

The broad expanse of sky was empty save for the flocks of cranes and wild fowl that passed far over our heads. There was the puddling sound of ducks in the marshy places, and the incessant booming of prairie chickens in the grass. Once some prairie chickens settled near-by and I begged mother to let me get out of the wagon to run and spread my dress over one—I was so sure I knew the exact spot where it was hidden.

As night approached we would seek a grove of

sheltering trees and a clear stream. Then father would bring water, build a fire, and take down the little green table and the splint-bottomed chairs from the back of the wagon, while mother prepared the meal. We were at home on the prairie with prairie chicken for supper! As the twilight settled into darkness, the wolves came slinking around the camp; and while they howled we children snuggled closer together in our beds in the wagon box, begging father to build the fire higher.

Sometimes we travelled alone and sometimes with other movers. We were always glad to have company, especially when fording swollen streams, for then we could double up teams and take turns in making the crossing.

It was with the deep thankfulness of true Quakers that we finally reached Concord, the county seat of Hancock County and now included in the town of Garner. There we camped while father went on to find the land where we were to establish our new home. It was a good piece of land but, without schools, neighbors, or roads, it was not suitable for a family of growing children. Learning of a better situated farm for sale about ten miles in another direction, father left us children with some new acquaintances while he and mother made a trip across country to inspect this more promising place. On their return mother carried a bouquet of flowers and when we asked her where she got them, she replied, "At home!"

The new home was a small farm house of one and a half stories, sealed with lumber in the living room and bedroom, but unfinished upstairs except for the floors. There we lived through two winters, with blizzards storming the house at all too frequent intervals. There were days when we could see only a few feet away because of the blinding snow; and often the cold was so intense that people were frozen to death out on the prairie. During such storms men were sometimes lost while going from the house to the barn. When father went to do the chores he would often tie a rope to the house to guide him back in safety.

In those early days there were no churches in northern Iowa. But we had good school laws, and the settlers were willing to pay high taxes themselves in order to collect a similar sum from "speculators", as the nonresident owners of unimproved land were called. The law authorized the establishment of schools wherever there were groups of four or five children of school age. If there was no school building, a room in a private home was often used. During two winters school was conducted in our house; and father taught the school. He was allowed forty dollars a month for teaching, besides rent for the room and fuel for heating.

Since neighbors were few and far away we had very little social life, so that each visitor and every item of news was most welcome. I remember reading from beginning to end every magazine and news-

paper that came to our house. It was always a "red letter day" when the mail arrived.

There was nothing that gave us more joy than the long winter evenings when we would all gather around the fire — mother knitting, father reading aloud, and we children cracking nuts. It seemed a real hardship to be compelled to go to bed early with little sister Beth who was afraid to be alone in the dark.

Life on the prairie farm was busy enough in the summer. The crops consisted chiefly of wheat, oats, and barley. In the early days very little corn was grown in northern Iowa because we thought that the climate was too cold. Since there were no fences, the cattle had to be herded during the summer.

Most dreaded on the frontier were the prairie fires. Once when father was returning from a business trip he saw a great fire sweeping in our direction. Terror-stricken, he rushed on as fast as he could; but it was far into the night before he reached home. There he found mother watching over the family, with all plans made to save the children if the fire should come too close. Luckily it did not reach us, but father spent the following day in plowing furrows around the house and barns and back-firing to prevent such danger in the future.

During the first summer in Hancock County mother had a large flower garden, in which she raised marigolds, hollyhocks, cypress vine, verbenas, and many other old-fashioned flowers. This was a

rare sight in those days, and people came from miles around to see it.

It was during our second summer in Hancock County that mother suffered a serious illness. The doctor had to come fifteen miles every day to see her. When she recovered, father, still in quest of the pioneer's El Dorado, sold his farm in Hancock County and moved to Cerro Gordo County, where he bought a farm just outside the limits of Clear Lake. There he built a fine new house, and there we lived to see thriving towns grow up around us. The quest for a home on the prairie became only a memory.

Such is the story of my grandmother, Mary Moore McLaughlin, as she loves to tell it to her only granddaughter who is never to see the beautiful, flower-starred Iowa prairie; who is never to experience the thrills of a journey in a covered wagon, nor face the hardships of life on a frontier farm. It is a simple story, but it is typical of the lives that make up the history of the beginnings of our Commonwealth.

KATHARINE HORACK

In Retrospect

Thank you for *Hard Times in Iowa*, published in the May PALIMPSEST. I went through much of it as a boy, beginning at Rodman's Point (now South English), in Keokuk County, Iowa, in October, 1854. That winter we lived in a part of a one-room log house, a side building of Rodman's Tavern. Here my father brought to a horse-power portable saw-mill some logs from his timber plot near South English River, prepared the same for siding and for shingles with his own tools, and in the spring of 1855, erected a two-room frame house on his unbroken prairie land for his family. This house was not well constructed for inclement Iowa winters but here we lived in the struggle for self-support previous to the Civil War — a period of continuous hard times that never could be surpassed. He had bought his land by using two forty-acre Mexican War land warrants and he planted corn on a few acres of new sod in the spring of 1855. There was no market, no chance for labor, no opportunity for school as yet, no money, little stores with little stocks of goods, and all of us lived off of the country, depending upon game of all kinds, nuts in the vicinity, wild fruits of great variety, corn meal, lye hominy, sheep sorrel pie, and other local possibilities for tea such as barks. I ate so much venison in

those days that I have never wanted any since. I had so much prairie chicken and wild pigeon and quail that I longed for domestic chicken. Plenty to eat, green wood to burn, and the milk of a \$10.00 cow for support of the family. Going to mill came later when there was a little wheat to grind. The only kind of money we saw was Illinois "Wild Cat" currency that needed a bank note detector to find out its possible status. Barter was the only way to get the few goods wanted and credit was given at the stores for the few things that could be sold, as cash did not exist in the making of changes.

The stagecoach from Iowa City to Sigourney brought mail once a week, distributed by reading every address out loud to deliver it to the settler — who was never absent on such occasions. The winter weather, the blizzards, the snow drifts, the winds, the lack of suitable clothing for protection, all added to the pioneer's woes and independence.

The first schoolhouse was built in 1855, the taxes being levied and collected by the secretary of the new school district (my father). When this schoolhouse was built it became the center of all community life: church service, Sunday schools, spelling schools, singing schools, lyceums — all of which were attended by everybody. The religious denominations were organized with a few members in each division and peace was kept by giving the Campbellites the first Sunday of the month, the Baptists the second Sunday, the Dunkards the third Sunday, and

the Methodists the fourth Sunday. What picnics! Food served on tables in common. What camp meetings! What 4th of July celebrations! What exhibitions of forensics! What round town ball games! What competition in foot races; long jumps; hop, step and jump; bull pen, etc., all games that were famous for the athletes of that day.

Well, we did not know there were hardships, we were a very happy people, we were all well-behaved and of good moral character, and we got ready for college despite our limitations because the preparatory schools in the colleges and universities were not lacking in good teaching; rented a room for \$3.00 a month that would house three boys comfortably, did our own washing, cooked our own meals, and survived on \$150.00 a year, paying for clothing, books, subsistence, and travel. Those were better days than it might seem because everybody learned self-reliance, self-dependence, and self-control without joining the Boy Scouts or the Y. M. C. A.

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