

THE PALIMPSEST

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VOL. V

ISSUED IN MAY 1924

No. 5

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Hard Times in Early Iowa

The pioneers from the older settled regions of the East and South who came to the Iowa country during the thirties, forties, and early fifties were hardy folk. The uncertainties and even dangers of the trip westward, in many instances of several weeks' duration, did not deter them. They were desirous of founding homes, and the broad prairies west of the Mississippi were particularly attractive. So anxious for land were these sturdy adventurers that the presence of Indians, the lack of preëmption privileges, and even the patrolling of the great river by the dragoons to prevent settlement in Iowa served but to increase their desire to locate upon the frontier.

Uncomfortable conditions in this frontier country were endured with a rather marked degree of tranquility. Hard times were expected. The pioneers did not rend the heavens with their complaining but

accepted the isolation, severe weather, crude living quarters, hard work, crop failures, sickness, and even famine as a part of the inevitable routine. Such conditions were looked upon not as unbearable hardships but as necessary evils — the precursors of better days ahead.

The hardships of the early settlers began in most instances with the breaking of home ties and the beginning of a journey the outcome of which was at best uncertain. The possessions of these pioneer families were loaded into a covered wagon drawn by a team of horses or a yoke of oxen. In many instances a cow was led behind the wagon, and sometimes a small crate of chickens was included among the live stock. The overland journey stretched out interminably; men, women, and children grew weary of the monotony and the hastily prepared meals; horses or oxen became lean and shaggy; roads were often very bad; the general supplies — both money and provisions — ran low; and it was with a feeling of joy and relief when the Mississippi was reached. With the river safely crossed the former eagerness returned and once more anticipation of the new life the emigrants were about to enter caused their enthusiasm to be kindled anew.

The first business of the settler on reaching the place where he intended to locate was to select his claim and mark it off. The usual method was by “stepping and staking or blazing the lines”. Since the land had not yet been surveyed it was “neces-

sary to take the sun at noon and at evening as a guide by which to run these claim lines. So many steps each way counted three hundred and twenty acres, more or less, the legal area of a claim."

Having selected and located his claim, the next important duty of the settler was the preparation of some ground for planting. If the season were somewhat advanced his choice of crops was limited to vegetables of late maturity. Since a tract of land with some timber upon it was usually selected by the early settlers the first planting was done in the edge of the timber. "Here the sod was easily broken, not requiring the heavy teams and plows needed to break the prairie".

The first year's farming generally consisted of a "truck patch" planted in corn, potatoes, turnips, and other vegetables. These products furnished a welcome addition to the food supplies which the settlers had brought with them "such as flour or meal, bacon, and coffee or tea." In many instances, however, even with the most rigid economy there was not enough food.

Methods of farming in the early days were very crude and laborious. Agricultural machinery, even in the older regions, was not very highly developed and the pioneer's supply was scanty. Even the plow which had served so well "back home" was not suited to the prairie sod of Iowa. The corn was hoed; small grain was cradled; threshing was at best a slow and primitive process. The wooden harrow

and the tongueless cultivator were later developments.

The cradle, a kind of improved scythe, was used to cut all small grain such as wheat, oats, rye, barley, and flax. It consisted of a set of four or five wooden slats fastened to a stick and attached to the "snath" of the scythe. This attachment made it possible to lay the grain in such a way that it could be more readily bound into bundles for stacking and subsequent threshing. To swing a cradle from morning till night was a hard day's work for any man while he who followed, binding the grain into bundles with wisps of straw, had need indeed of a strong back and dexterous hands.

Threshing and cleaning the wheat crop was a vital affair, for the family's bread supply in a large measure depended upon it. The usual plan was to clean off a plot of ground of the desired circumference and, if the earth was dry, they dampened and "beat it so as to render it somewhat compact". The sheaves of wheat with the heads outward were spread in a circle and unbound. In the center sufficient space was left for the person whose duty it was "to stir and turn the straw in the process". Then as many horses or oxen "as could conveniently swing around the circle" were brought in and kept "moving till the wheat was well trodden out." After several "floorings" or layers were threshed, the straw was carefully raked off and the wheat shoveled into a heap to be cleaned. This process

was continued day after day until the season's crop was threshed.

Cleaning the wheat was usually accomplished more quickly, due in part to the fact that only the amount sold or used for flour was so treated. For this work a rather windy day was considered best — the chaff being easily removed when the grain was poured from one receptacle to another. On quiet days this “was sometimes done by waving a sheet up and down to fan out the chaff as the grain was dropped before it”. Such methods served well enough perhaps for the removal of chaffy matter but after all “it is not surprising that a considerable amount of black soil got mixed with it, that unavoidably went into the bread.”

As soon as the first crop was planted the next concern of the pioneer was to build a house. Until the cabin was inhabitable the family had “to camp on the ground or live in their wagons”. Camping equipment was not infrequently rather crude — a shelter being made of “poles stuck in the ground, with an old quilt stretched over the top”. The cooking had to be done over an open fire — a method of uncertain results. Since the pot-hook or crane was rarely used more than one meal was overturned with the settling of the fire. Furthermore, the presence of charcoal improves the flavor of few dishes.

The early cabins were not pretentious dwellings. Indeed, the settlers did not have the means or the help to erect other than “the cheapest thing imag-

inable". Some of the more primitive structures were of the sort known as "half-faced" sheds, but usually the claim cabin was about fourteen feet square and "made of round logs light enough for two or three men to lay up". These pioneer houses were commonly "roofed with bark or clapboards", though thatch was not unknown.

The cabin as a rule consisted of a single room with but one door and one window. One end was used for sleeping quarters while the other near the fireplace was employed for cooking and eating. The furniture was mostly of the rude, hand-made variety designed entirely for its utility, the beds, chairs, and table being all the product of pioneer handicraft. Kitchen utensils having been for the most part brought from the East were few in number but of the most substantial kind. It was considered a rather well-stocked kitchen that was equipped with an iron pot or kettle, a frying pan with a long handle, and a coffee pot. In fact, considering that cook stoves were almost unknown, these articles were about all that could be used to advantage. The habit of using "make-shifts" and of "getting along somehow" was strong among the pioneers. The leaky dishpan repaired with a bit of rag was typical of the times.

Conditions of living in the average home were not such as would have won the enthusiastic approval of a modern sanitary engineer. "Cooking, eating, sleeping, washing, dressing, nursing the sick, laying

out the dead"—all of these duties were performed in the one-room cabin. Wet "socks or jean britches were given preference to the coffee-pot and meat-skillet on the hearth", while the owner was relegated to bed during the drying process. At times the dressing of game was a fireside occupation.

Screen doors were unknown and the "common house fly and the big blue bottle" had free access to the cabin. At meal time they settled upon the food in such numbers "that one of the family was kept busy with a shooer". Then, too, the system of ventilation left much to be desired. In the winter the fireplace provided the only avenue of fresh air and even its wide capacity must have been taxed with a "sleeping contingent of from ten to twenty" people.

The pioneer cabins were infested with mice which "scurried about the floor and cupboards" and, though "slaughtered by the score", there appeared to be no marked reduction in their numbers. Mosquitoes abounded and their humming at times "sounded like the approach of a coming storm". Day and night the "smudge-pot" was kept going until everything "about the cabin acquired a smoky look and smell." At night the repose of many an early settler was made hideous by the ravenous appetite of the "crimson-rambler". The extermination of these pests was practically hopeless on account of the nature of the houses so the women confined their efforts to measures of "reasonable restraint".

The menu of the average household was meager indeed. The staples consisted of corn dodger, black wheat bread, meat of wild animals such as bear, deer, fowl, rabbit, and squirrel, and wild honey. Sometimes there were the additional luxuries of sugar, coffee, and tea. Most of the streams abounded in fish of all kinds and furnished the pioneer a welcome change of diet. Vegetables were usually raised in sufficient quantity to supplement the more staple supplies, but not infrequently the early settlers were hard pressed for food when crops were scanty and the winters long and severe. If the supply of ammunition was exhausted a very necessary source of food supply became unavailable. More than one family in the early days was forced to subsist upon bread made from powdered bark or upon ground "bark fried in deer's tallow." Nobody bothered to "count calories", while the beneficent properties of vitamins were completely ignored.

The winter of 1856 and '57 was one of unusual severity and the suffering among many families was intense. It was said that the snow was about four feet deep on the level so that the more remote settlers were effectively isolated. Provisions were exhausted. Some people "killed their cattle and subsisted upon them for days after their flour and meal had given out, whilst others lived upon parched corn." During this winter one settler walked to Sioux City, a distance of sixteen miles, "arriving there one day and returning the next to his starving

family with a sack of flour for which he paid \$10.00, and carried it the entire distance on his back." By the time this flour was consumed the snow had increased in depth, the entire family was afflicted with scurvy, and as a last resort a cow "high of bones and poor of flesh" was slaughtered. Fire-wood gave out and, being some distance from the timber, they could not obtain more. Thereupon the walls of the cabin were attacked with the ax in order to secure enough splinters to cook their meat. It is recorded that in many instances the pioneers kept to "their beds a greater portion of the day to avoid freezing."

Money troubles among the pioneers constituted a real difficulty. The panics of 1837 and 1857 were keenly felt even as far west as Iowa. The policy of the Democrats in refusing to grant charters to banking corporations caused the State to be flooded with "wild cat" paper money and added materially to the financial distress. Agricultural produce was difficult to market and brought but little money, while commodities needed by the settlers were relatively dear.

The year 1843 especially, when the panic of 1837 reached Iowa, seems to have been one of hardship, since "corn and oats could be bought at from six to ten cents per bushel, pork at a dollar a hundred, and the best kind of horses the farmers could raise would only bring from fifty to sixty dollars." At this time almost "everybody was in debt, and the sheriff and constable, with a legal process, trying to collect a

debt, were frequent visitors at almost every man's door".

The spring of 1857, following a winter of the utmost severity, "was late and backward". Provisions which the settlers had to buy were unusually high and many were compelled to sell their farms for "a song". "Flour was fourteen dollars per barrel, meat and butter could not be bought at any price". Spurious currency flooded the State and "about all trade was carried on by swapping articles". Three bushels of "white beans would buy a calico dress."

Travel was especially difficult in the early days. It was no uncommon practice to do hauling by oxen for a distance of sixty or eighty miles. The slow mode of travel by ox teams was made still slower "by the almost total absence of roads and bridges". When the frost came out of the ground and the heavy rains descended the sloughs and creeks proved exceedingly troublesome. Wagons which stuck in the mud had to be "unloaded and taken to pieces" and either carried by hand to firmer ground or ferried across the stream in small boats.

A trip to the mill was an undertaking of no small magnitude — a mill forty miles distant being considered "handy". During the summer "when grass was plentiful", the passage of the lonely stretches of prairie could be made "without much difficulty". The farmer travelled till night, then camped out and fed his team on the range. But in the winter when

the prairie became a desert waste such a trip was attended with great danger. The road "was too obscure to be safely followed at night" and it became necessary to time the trip so as to spend the nights with other settlers along the route.

Having arrived at the mill "after a week or more of toilsome travel, attended by more or less exposure", the pioneer was often shocked with the information "that his turn would come in a week." This delay sometimes made it necessary for the settler to "look about for some means to save expenses, and he was lucky" if he could find employment at any wage. Then when his turn came he had to be on hand to help the miller "bolt his flour". When this task was done "the anxious soul was ready to endure the trials of a return trip, his heart more or less concerned" about affairs at home. These trips "often occupied from three weeks to more than a month" and were attended with an expense "that rendered the cost of bread-stuff extremely high."

Clothing, too, was a real pioneer problem — the apparel brought from back East being unsuited to the rough conditions of the West. Most of the clothing was home-made of buckskin and coarse jean for the men and linsey and calico for the women. Little or no attention was given to fashion in those days: utility and lack of skill determined the lines of the finished product. "Store clothes" were practically unknown.

Living conditions in general were hard indeed

among the pioneers of Iowa. Their cabins were small, families were large, and household equipment was scanty. Their work had to be done by the crudest of methods, poverty and dirt were common companions, and the food was coarse and unsavory. Only the indomitable spirit of the pioneer, the hope of better things in the future made living endurable.

The struggle of the early settler was strenuous. At times all things, even nature itself, seemed to conspire against him. The winters were intensely cold, blizzards were uncommonly severe, and the uncharted distances made the life of the first comers a lonely business. Spring brought the rain — perfect deluges of water — to delay the preparation of the ground for planting. Finally, when the crops were in, the pests came — grasshoppers, cut worms, blight, and rust. The newly broken sod seemed to exude ague and fever in the summer, while lack of proper diet not infrequently produced scurvy.

The pioneers were a rugged race. Hard work, coarse food, and the outdoor life left little opportunity for a doctor to practice. Ailments of a minor character were treated with home remedies. All sorts of concoctions were prepared — sulphur and sorghum, boneset and burdock bitters, sassafras and smartwood tea, lard and turpentine ointment, slippery-elm salve, mustard plasters, skunk oil, and goose grease. Either burdock bitters or sulphur and molasses was taken as a spring tonic by everyone, sick or well. The bitters were made by stewing cer-

tain "roots, herbs and barks". At the proper time the liquid was "drained off and mixed with maple-syrup and whisky". Whisky formed the base of all bitters and was indeed the "all around remedial rejuvenator"—being "taken as an eye-opener before breakfast and a victual settler after meals, an exhilarator between them, and as a nightcap at bedtime." The early settlers learned from experience that whisky was without a peer as a cure for snake bites, a preventative for ague, and it worked equally well in restoring one who had been overheated in summer or chilled in winter. It was the pioneer's cureall. Hard work and hard liquor were boon companions.

Every member of the pioneer family had his appointed task. The men — and boys became men at an early age — put in and cared for the crops and stock, erected buildings, split rails for fences, cut firewood, cleared timber land, and made long trips to market and to mill. The women folks cooked, baked, spun cloth, fashioned clothing, knit stockings, washed (carrying water from the spring or well), nursed the sick, and taught the children. The boys and girls helped with all sorts of tasks: they herded stock, piled wood, carried water to the men in the field, cracked corn for hominy, did the chores, and performed innumerable odd jobs. Every one contributed his share to this life in which hard labor played the most prominent part.

Pioneer life in Iowa was pretty much "all work and no play". Occasionally two or three families

would get together on Sunday for a day of visiting, but such meetings were conspicuously few, as the distances to be travelled and the fatiguing character of the week's tasks made Sabbath observance more than a formality. On the other hand release from the rather dull routine of their lives in the form of a house or barn "raising", a husking or threshing "bee", or of a "logging" was hailed as a gala occasion. Even hunting and fishing were not regarded entirely as pastimes, being often pursued of grim necessity. In general each family was, for purposes of entertainment, a self-sufficient unit.

Observance of Christmas, then as now, was decidedly a domestic affair. Gifts, though few in number, were of a practical sort, usually consisting of knitted mittens, stockings, mufflers, caps, and hoods. Rarely a little girl found some beads in the toe of her stocking and a boy was made joyous with a brand-new jack-knife. Meager as such presents were, the spirit of Christmas prevailed and true happiness reigned in the pioneer home on Christmas-day.

The Fourth of July was the date universally set apart for a community celebration when the pioneers gathered from miles around for a day of relaxation, visiting, and feasting. A grove was usually the place of meeting, a fiery orator addressed the people, and a dinner for a couple hundred men, women, and children was spread on the ground. Such celebrations were very different from those of more recent

times: their spirit survives in the old settlers' picnics.

Such were the conditions in Iowa only two or three generations ago. Now the "old pioneer days are gone, with their roughness and their hardship, their incredible toil and their wild, half-savage romance" — but the "need for the pioneer virtues remains the same as ever".

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