

The **PALIMPSEST**

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS MAGAZINE

The PALIMPSEST, issued monthly by the State Historical Society of Iowa, is devoted to the dissemination of Iowa History. Supplementing the other publications of this Society, it aims to present the materials of Iowa History in a form that is attractive and a style that is popular in the best sense—to the end that the story of our Commonwealth may be more widely read and cherished.

BENJ. F. SHAMBAUGH

Superintendent

THE MEANING OF PALIMPSESTS

In early times palimpsests were parchments or other materials from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the records of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

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THE PALIMPSEST

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Lost in an Iowa Blizzard

The setting down of this experience of the earlier years of Reuben and David Williams has sprung from a desire to place on record, while they may yet be told by one of the participants, the details of what has always been, in our immediate family circle, an exceedingly thrilling incident of my father's boyhood days. The dates, places, and other facts of the story are historically accurate. David Williams is now 76 years old and, retired, lives in Gridley, California. Reuben Williams died in October, 1898, at Trosky, Minnesota, in his 62nd year.

The vast grassy prairies of northern Iowa which have since made it famous as an agricultural State, were at first shunned by the early settlers. No doubt the chief reasons for avoiding the prairies was the difficulty of obtaining fuel, and the absence of protection against the cold winds of winter. As settlements became closer, the more venturesome began to establish prairie homes. Across the miles

of bleak plain, then essentially destitute of obstruction of any kind, the winds had opportunity to gain their full force. In winter the deeply drifted snow obliterated all landmarks. Travel from one point to another was often possible only on snow-shoes, although at times the solid icy crust of the snow would carry the weight of a horse.

Blizzards were of common occurrence and fatalities not infrequent. In the face of a blinding whirl of snow all familiar objects vanished. Dependence on sheer Indian instinct, an intuitive sense of distance and direction, was often the only chance of safety. And especially real was the danger if night came on. Reliance on native instinct, however, was not always assurance of a safe return to shelter. From these early days have come down vivid accounts of suffering endured and lives lost. The story that follows, however, is of two boys who passed a night in the teeth of a bewildering snow-storm and yet escaped with their lives. I have heard it told by my father many times and I give the details here in his own words.¹

IRA A. WILLIAMS

PORTLAND, OREGON, DECEMBER, 1920

The winter of 1856-57 was the hardest the settlers then in Iowa had ever seen. Father had a large family and was poor. We boys all had to work at

¹ This account in a slightly longer form appeared in *The Register and Leader* (Des Moines) February 23, 1913.

whatever we could get to do. Reuben, who was the oldest, had hired out to Mr. Horace Green for a few months. Green lived over on Willow Creek some three miles from our place and about four miles northwest of Masonic Grove (now Mason City). Willow Creek is the outlet to Clear Lake and runs through Mason City. Mr. Green kept a lot of cattle and always had several pairs of big oxen. His house was on the open prairie, without a sign of a tree or other windbreak for protection. Nor had he yet even been able to build any sheds for his cattle.

It was late in December and Mr. Green had gone to Dubuque to get a load of supplies. Halfway across Iowa and back by team in the middle of winter in those days was a long trip and a hard and indefinite task. Even Mrs. Green did not know when he might return. Green's going left her and Reuben to take care of things and look after the stock, and although Reuben was man-grown, I think eighteen or nineteen, he had his hands more than full. I was only twelve years old, but was fully accustomed to doing outdoor work, so I went over to help until Mr. Green came back.

We had had some real hard blizzards before that and there was lots of snow. One of our biggest jobs was watering the cattle. The house was on a spring branch some distance from where this stream joined the main Willow Creek. There had been plenty of water here all along, but the snow had finally drifted in so deeply that it became impossible to keep it open longer for the stock to get down to drink.

I had been there a few days. It was December 28, 1856. The sun rose bright that morning and the atmosphere was as clear as a bell. It was cold but there was no reason whatever for us to expect any great change before night. Reuben and I did up the chores and along about 11 o'clock Mrs. Green said she thought it would be best to take the cattle across to Willow Creek to water them that day. The old watering-hole in the yard was drifted full and, as the day was pleasant, we would save time and easily be back by noon, we thought.

To get to the creek we had to go down the branch a way and then over the point of a ridge between the two streams. This ridge was covered with new breaking and the snow on it was not very deep. We got the cattle across all right and, after a half hour's hard shoveling and chopping, had a large hole in the ice open where they could get down to the water. Naturally, busy as we were, we paid no attention to the sky nor thought anything about the weather. We were out of sight from the buildings yet not over one half or three quarters of a mile from the house.

We had worked hard and were nearly through watering the last of four or five calves that were in the herd. It must have been about one o'clock in the afternoon. Reuben was down dipping out water for the calves with a pail we had carried with us. Without warning of any kind the storm burst upon us. A blast of wind swept down the bank behind

which we were working and in a second we were completely enveloped in the whirling snow that filled the air full.

This didn't frighten us any for it was a common enough experience. Our first thought was to get the cattle back to the house. Buttoning tight our short coats and picking up the shovel and ax, we tried to drive them back the way they had come. It was straight against the wind, which was already so stiff we could scarcely stand in the face of it, and penetratingly cold. They refused to go. We knew that if only some of the big steers would make a start towards home, the rest would follow. But each time we managed to get them headed about they would veer this way and that, and finally come to a determined standstill, their tails to the wind.

If there had been a nice warm barn at home, or even a shed awaiting them, it would have been different. But outside of the low, hay-covered stable where Green kept his horses there was nothing there to break the force of the wind in the least. Behind this and in the lee of a small hay-stack they were in the habit of huddling together, though little more protected than in the open field. An incentive for the animals to face the cutting wind across the bare field in the direction of home was, therefore, all but lacking. With shelter ahead of him a steer will put his head down and buck almost any kind of a wind that does not actually blow him backwards. But to convince them to move against their inclinations proved quite another matter.

Next we undertook to get the oxen started. They were well-broken and valuable animals. To let them stray, of all times in Mr. Green's absence, was certainly the last thing to be thought of. Obedient and willing brutes though they were in the yoke, our commands in the face of the blinding blizzard went entirely unheeded. It seemed like hours that we toiled with those cattle. Reuben had been left in charge of the stock and felt all of a man's responsibility for their safety. He was determined to take them back to shelter. So we kept doggedly at it until we were both tired completely out. It was of no use. The cattle became so badly scattered and the intensity of the storm had increased so much that we were compelled to give up. It had also rapidly grown colder. We were blinded by the snow, and pieces of ice blown from the old snow crust cut our faces like a knife.

So we struck the ax and shovel in the snow and left them. They were found afterwards out there on the breaking. From there I am certain we could have made our way against the storm to the house. I urged Reuben to go home and let the cattle take care of themselves. But he wouldn't hear to going back without them.

A short distance down the other side of the creek from where we had watered the stock was a small grove of crab-apple trees, underbrush and willows. We knew we could get to this and there be protected from the wind. In the hope that the storm might

soon break so that we could go out and round up the cattle before night, we made for this crab-apple thicket. To reach it we crossed the main road running between Masonic Grove and Clear Lake. It was plainly marked in the otherwise unbroken white by the flanking lines of weeds whose tops still showed above the snow. When we came to the road I again remonstrated. Knowing that Reuben in his present frame of mind could not be persuaded to face Mrs. Green without the stock, I suggested following the road to Masonic Grove to wait until the blizzard eased up somewhat. I was getting fearfully cold. He said "No", that we would be all right, still intending, he confessed, to make another trial with the cattle as soon as we warmed up a bit in the shelter of the grove.

Within the thicket the air was quiet, and by "strapping" our hands and jumping about we were soon warm enough. I suppose it was at least three or four o'clock in the afternoon by this time. The storm continued to increase in violence outside. To think of venturing out again after the stock would be clearly foolhardy, yet I could not gain Reuben's consent to go back without them. It had not occurred to either of us then that we ourselves might be in any danger.

Hours passed. Daylight began to fade and we knew that night was coming on. The wind did not reach us, but to keep up circulation in the biting cold we started a path in the snow around a clump

of trees in the center of the thicket. It was perhaps three or four rods around the circle. We took turns. First one, then the other, would take the path and walk, or trot, or run, till our blood tingled. Between times we squatted in the snow, back against a tree, until beginning numbness warned us it was time to run again.

After darkness came on we could tell little about the progress of the storm. An occasional trip to the edge of the thicket, however, was sufficient to assure us of the unabated fury of the wind, and we thought the temperature was still going down. Reuben was finally compelled to abandon hope of getting any of the stock back before morning. What with our continued exercises and intermittent breathing spells, we kept ourselves quite comfortable, and the soft snow was soon packed solid in our little circuit. We did not know the time, but it must have been about midnight when the stars shone out straight above us, and it looked as if the clouds were clearing away.

Within our friendly shelter we could have securely spent the rest of the night. But at the farthest the house was not over a mile away, and we knew Mrs. Green would be exceedingly anxious over our long absence. So Reuben decided that we should leave the grove, the thought that we might not be able to go straight to the Green's house not entering either of our minds. We were warm to start, had our directions true, and knew every inch of the ground.

As I recall it now, I think I begged Reuben to stay where we were until daylight. He was obdurate and we started out. No doubt discomfiture over the loss of the cattle still rankled within him. Outside of the thicket was a raging snowstorm. Confident of our course, we floundered through the drifts, at the start, square against the storm; the sharp hurtling scales of ice cutting our faces and the floury snow filling our nostrils and eyes. On we pushed towards where Mrs. Green's kindly beacon should have guided us to safety. This way and that we turned in the darkness, the sense of our exact whereabouts growing more and more vague, yet certain in the hope that intuition would soon point us to the door. We were lost.

Failing to find the house, our next thought was, of course, to return to the crab-apple thicket. But it, too, was not to be found. The wild blackness of the night had swallowed it up. Once voluntarily scorning its kindly protection, it now eluded us; and we were left to fight alone our one-sided battle with the elements.

It was almost impossible for us to realize that we were actually lost. Here we were in a region, every foot of which was familiar ground in time of calm. And yet, so completely was the recognition of all familiar landmarks closed to us that, in our bewilderment, we knew neither north, south, east, nor west. The realization, however, that shelter must be found was not slow in coming, for the exertion

of merely keeping in motion was rapidly telling on me, and the gripping cold was sinking to the marrow. To stop anywhere within the sweep of the wind we knew must mean certain death. To go aimlessly on and on in the face of the storm was equally certain to mean pure physical exhaustion, and then — but although Reuben's maturer mind may have sensed already the tragic possibility, through his cheering encouragement no thought of such an ending came to me.

We went with the storm. Long, long we blundered ahead. Reuben half dragged, half carried me on. One step the snow bore our weight, the next we floundered in it. At last, after what seemed miles, we tumbled down a steep bank. I had been begging Reuben to let me stop. I was tired out, cold and sleepy. Only too well did my big brother recognize these symptoms. He had urged me on, talked to me, chaffed me, dragged and pushed me along, all but kicked and pommelled me, anything to ward off and stay the progress of the cold which was slowly but surely stiffening my very blood.

Behind the bank where we had fallen the wind did not reach with its full fury. I told Reuben I was going to rest here. I could go no further. All of his arguments were of no avail. My feet were numb. I was completely exhausted. I could not walk, and he, though strong as an ox, saw disaster ahead for both of us if he undertook to carry me. I wanted to go to sleep.

Out of the wind a little I lay down in the snow. All the way along Reuben had clung to me with first one hand then the other. I do not think I had any mittens. I know I tried to keep my hands from freezing by walking with them in my pockets. Reuben's hands were bare. While he was dipping water for the calves he had soaked two fingers of the glove on his left hand and they had frozen stiff. He took his gloves off while we were in the crab-apple thicket and stuck them up in the crotch of a tree. We found them there afterwards where he had placed them.

I do not know how long I lay there. The snow quickly drifted over me. Reuben did not give up, but kept moving all night long. He paced back and forth in the snow. I can only recall that he constantly talked to me. So long as I would answer, he knew I was awake. We had heard of persons saving their lives by burrowing into the snow out of the biting wind. In my benumbed condition I did not reason. But I am certain that Reuben was thoroughly conscious of the danger of this. It was plainly now a drawn battle for our lives. Chagrin over the loss of the cattle had nerved rather than weakened him for the struggle. And an indomitable pride of responsibility for me bore him up against the almost irresistible desire to rest and to sleep that now beset him.

Throughout the night his vigil did not cease. I must have fallen asleep. It seemed to me I was

warm and comfortable. The snow had covered me over completely, only the toe of one of my boots remaining in sight to show where I lay buried. They were new boots with red tops that my uncle had given me when I started to walk to Iowa from our old home in Illinois the summer before.

Daylight slowly came. As surroundings began to be visible, the place appeared more and more familiar. Yet it was not until near sunrise that Reuben could make out that we were within calling distance of one of the houses in Masonic Grove (now Mason City). It was fully four miles back to the little crab-apple grove, though how much farther we had wandered since leaving it we would never know.

I was brought back to a drowsy consciousness by being pulled out of the snow by Reuben. The air was so cold it seemed fairly blue, and its cutting bitterness struck into my flesh like steel. The rising sun shone large and the guardian sun-dogs, one on either side, betokened the keenness of the opening day. I tried to walk, but my feet were dead. As if wooden, my benumbed body refused to respond to a still more feeble will. Reuben's efforts to get me towards the house were fruitless. The last I recall was hearing him shout to some one.

When I came to I was in bed. My hands were being rubbed with snow. My new leather boots had been cut from my feet which now rested in melting ice. As full consciousness returned, I learned how we had at first been taken for Indians; and how,

when it was known that we were actually in distress, Mr. James Jenkins and Mr. Tenure had come out and carried me in. Dr. Huntley had been at once sent for. Reuben had followed me into the house and had gone straight to the fire. Both of his hands were frozen stiff, as were mine, and his feet were clumps of ice. I have heard him say that he never again suffered such anguish as the soul-crazing pangs of returning feeling that racked his chilled body while he stood there beginning to thaw out. All attention was at first given to me, of course, and it was only after I was seen to be out of danger that it appeared to any one that Reuben might be at all badly frozen. The torpid pallor of pain and exhaustion already showed in his twitching face and he reeled at every step. The doctor at once applied ice to his hands and feet. Though belated, this measure probably saved to him the use of these members. Casings of solid ice formed around our feet, then slowly melted away as the blood sluggishly gained its way into them again.

It was hours before the frost was all drawn out. Much of this time I was in a partial stupor. I think neither of us suffered much severe pain after the first aching paroxysms were over. But the very joy of relaxation after the terrible strain of the past night was in itself overpowering. I roused repeatedly from a disturbed sleep in which I was again struggling with the raging storm, again going through, in all its horror, the frightful experience of the night before.

Word was at once sent to Mrs. Green that we were safe. She was thus prepared to break the news to mother and father who happened to drive over early that morning. It had been one of the hardest storms of the winter and they, knowing that Mr. Green was away, had come to see how we boys were getting on. As he unfastened the ox-team, father jokingly called out, "Don't see anything of the boys this morning; frozen up, are they?" "Guess they must be", Mrs. Green replied, in the same bantering tone, "They've been since eleven o'clock yesterday morning watering the stock over on the Willow, and they're only four miles away in Masonic Grove now". Even she was not then aware of how perilous an experience traversing that four miles had been to us.

So father at once came on down expecting to take us back to Green's to hunt up the lost cattle. Mrs. Green's anxiety was one of genuine motherly interest in us boys, as much as of responsibility for the security of her husband's property. She told mother that morning how she had kept a light in the window the night through, and of how she rang the old cow-bell for us. When darkness came on and we did not return, she knew we were in trouble. All through that wild night she kept up the vigil. She had gone out into the storm and clanged the old bell until out of breath, and until the sting of the frigid blast drove her back to the fireside. Over and over, and as long as strength held out had the plucky

woman kept it up. We have never wondered that its feeble tones failed to reach our ears in the howling storm, though how close to its call we may really have been we shall never know.

The days that followed were languishing ones, but physically sturdy as we were, recovery was fairly rapid. Medical attention was of course necessary. Although present day anaesthetics were then unknown and surgical instruments crude, we have never attributed to their absence the fact that we found ourselves crippled for the rest of our days. The ministrations of a devoted mother through the long days of convalescence, and encouragement and care from a father of stern but devoutly religious temperament, were the inspiring influences which made seem so much worth while the life that had been spared us.

Early Cabins in Iowa

A creaking, canvas-covered wagon slowly came to a halt as the oxen, tired from the long journey, ceased straining at the yoke. The driver looked about him at the expanse of prairie, unbroken except for the timber which fringed an occasional water course. Far behind lay his old home. Days before he had crossed the Mississippi, and leaving the busy river town had pushed westward until he had passed all signs of habitation and reached this virgin prairie. Nowhere was a sheltering roof to be seen except the covered wagon whose protection was given to the women and children. The only table upon which to partake of the plain meals of corn bread and bacon was the green earth.

But this sketch is not biographical; nor does it deal with the unique. All up and down the Iowa frontier this scene was being repeated. Sometimes a lonely wagon made its way to the edge of the unknown; sometimes a group of neighbors or related families made the venture together. In every case the pioneer's first thought was to prepare a home. It would be a dwelling place for his family, a fortress against the Indians, a nucleus for civilization. Under these conditions building the cabin came to be an event of great importance and produced a thrill of pleasure that could hardly be understood by those who had never suffered the same privations.

The first home was necessarily a simple affair. In the prairie country where wood was scarce and sod was plentiful, the easiest house to build was the sod shanty. The materials were procured by taking the breaking plow into the low land where the sod was heavy and plowing a furrow from sixteen to eighteen inches in width. This was cut into sections, eighteen to twenty inches long, which were then laid like brick. The roof was usually made of large rafters covered with prairie hay or grass and covered again with sod. Often the structure had a board floor, and usually one door and one window. It is surprising the amount of genius that could be expended in the construction of a sod shanty. For this reason, there was great difference in the appearance and arrangement of these cabins. Some had an air of comfort, convenience, and even neatness, which gave them a genuine homelike appearance. Others remained as they were at first — simply holes in the ground.

Even in the wooded districts finished lumber was not to be had and labor was dear. As a result the architecture of the home entered very little into the thoughts of the early settlers — it was shelter they wanted, and protection from the stress of weather. The settler had neither the money nor the mechanical appliances for building himself a modern house: he was content in most instances to have a mere cabin.

Of dwellings made of timber, perhaps the most

primitive were the "three faced" camps. These structures — sometimes called "cat faced" sheds or "wickeups"— consisted of three walls made of logs in their rough state — the fourth side being left open. The first settler in a community who had to build his cabin without assistance selected small logs that he could raise to the walls alone, but after neighbors came larger logs were used. Across these walls, poles were laid at a distance of about three feet apart, and on these was placed a roof of clapboards which were kept in position by weight-poles. The only floor in the camp was the earth, and the structure required neither door, window, nor chimney, for the open side answered all these purposes. Immediately in front of the cabin was built a huge log fire which served for warmth and for cooking purposes. These "three-faced camps", built apparently in a hurry to afford a resting place for a family without a home, were temporary in most cases and were soon supplanted by more complete dwelling places.

The claim cabins proper, which followed these first buildings, required some help and a good deal of labor to build. House raisings were frequent and became social as well as industrial events. After the logs had been cut into the desired length according to the dimensions of the house, they were dragged to the building place by horses. The neighbors were then called upon to assist. Four men were selected to "carry up the corners", and

the work began. As the logs were lifted up a "saddle" was hewn upon the top of one log and a notch cut in the underside of the next to fit upon the saddle. By cutting the notches in the larger end of the log a little deeper and alternating the butt and top ends the walls of the cabin were carried up approximately level. At first the logs were put together with the bark on. As the idea of decoration and elegance increased a place was chipped along two sides of each log. Finally the inside and outside of the cabin walls were hewn so as to present a flat surface.

When the house-walls had reached a height of seven or eight feet, two gables were formed by shortening the logs gradually at each end of the building near the top, and fastening each log to the one below or to the roof logs. The roof was made by laying very straight small logs or stout poles from gable to gable at regular intervals and on these were fastened the clapboards very much in the same manner as modern shingles, only with fewer courses, as the clapboards were perhaps four feet long and generally about two and a half feet to the weather. Weight poles were laid over the whole and were secured by long wooden pins, driven into auger holes, which kept them from slipping down toward the lower edge of the roof.

When this sheltering roof was completed the small cracks between the wall logs were stopped with "chinking". The spaces were filled in with split

sticks of wood, called "chinks", and then daubed over, both inside and outside, with mortar made of clay which had straw or hay mixed with it to keep it from crumbling and falling out. In this way the cabin was made comfortably warm during the long cold winter.

Sometimes an opening was left for a door when the logs were laid, but usually the door space was made by cutting an aperture of the required size in one side of the room. The doorway was not always provided immediately with a door, but instead the most simple contrivances that would serve the purpose were brought into requisition. In some cases a quilt, blanket, or skin was spared for the purpose of guarding the entrance. There is an instance in which a table is said to have served as a door also, being taken down and used for a table, and rehung as a door after meals. As soon as convenient a shutter of some kind was provided. Sometimes this was a thatched frame work, but more often it consisted of two large clapboards or puncheons, pinned together with cross pieces and wooden pins. The door was hung on wooden hinges and held shut by a wooden catch. Through a hole above the latch a buckskin thong passed which when pulled lifted the wooden bar thus allowing the door to open. For security at night this latch string could be drawn in, hence, as an expression of welcome, there arose the saying: "The latch string is always hanging out".

Frequently there was no window at first. Later

when duties became less pressing, a hole about two feet long was cut out of one of the wall logs. Whenever possible the window was on the south side and could be left open during the summer at least. Greased or oiled paper pasted over sticks crossed in the shape of a sash was often used as a substitute for window glass. It admitted the light and excluded the air, but of course lacked the transparency. Even greased deer hide was sometimes used.

The chimney of the western pioneer's cabin was not built of stone or brick, but in most cases of split sticks of wood and mortar made of clay. Space was provided by leaving in the original building a large open place in the wall, or more often perhaps, by cutting one after the structure was up. The fireplace — at least six feet wide and frequently of such dimensions as to occupy nearly the whole width of the house — was constructed in this opening. It was planked on the outside by butts of wood notched together to stay it. The back and sides were built of stone, of wood lined with stone, or of stone and earth, the stone-work facing into the room. A large flat rock in front of it, called a hearth stone, was placed level with the floor to protect the puncheons from brands that might roll out of the fire. For a chimney, or flue, any contrivance that would conduct the smoke upward would do. Some flues consisted of squares of sod, laid as a mason lays a wall of bricks and plastered on the inside with clay. Perhaps the more common type was that known as the

“cat and clay” chimney. It was built of small split sticks, two and a half or three feet in length, carried a little distance above the roof, and plastered, both inside and outside, with a thick covering of clay. Built as they were the burning of a chimney was a frequent occurrence in cold weather.

Other accessories were added as soon as possible. The clay which had previously served as a floor and which had been beaten hard and smooth by this time was overlaid with a “puncheon” floor consisting of slabs hewn from logs. After the floor was laid the upper surface would be smoothed off with an adz. As a final touch of elegance a few more logs were sometimes put on the building making an upstairs or loft which was reached by a ladder secured to the wall. Other families built a better roof or an additional room.

During all of this building process there was ordinarily no sound of hammering of nails or rasping of the saw, only the dull thud of the ax. The pioneer was often forced to build his cabin without nails, screws, bolts, bars, or iron of any description. Wooden pegs were hewn from the logs; the hinges and even the catch for the door were wooden.

The living room was of good size, for usually it served the purpose of kitchen, bedroom, parlor, and arsenal. In other words the loom, spinning wheel, chairs, beds, cooking utensils, and other furniture were all arranged as snugly as possible in this one room. With an ax and an auger the pioneer met all

pressing needs. The furniture varied in proportion to the ingenuity of the occupants, except in the rare instances where settlers brought with them their old household supply.

The articles used in the kitchen were few and simple. Lacking the convenience of a cook stove, the work was done in and about the big fireplace. The utensils of a well furnished kitchen included an iron pot, a long-handled frying pan, a skillet, and sometimes a coffee pot. Often a later improvement was found in the shape of an iron crane swinging from the side of the chimney and carrying on its "pot hook" the kettles or iron pots used in cooking.

Sometimes a mantel shelf was made by placing clapboards across strong wooden pins fitted into holes bored in the wall logs. This shelf might hold kitchen or table-ware, the candlestick with its deer tallow candle and possibly an old clock. If the family were lucky enough to have an abundance of table-ware, a series of shelves with perhaps a cheap cotton cloth as a curtain might be built for a china closet.

The necessity of finding a more convenient and comfortable place than the ground upon which to sleep, produced the "prairie bunk". This "one-legged" bedstead, now a piece of furniture of the past, was improvised by the pioneer in a unique manner. A forked stake was driven into the ground at a proper distance from the corner of the room and upon it poles, usually of hickory, were laid

reaching from each wall. These poles where they touched the walls rested in the openings between the logs or were driven into auger holes. Upon these poles slats of clapboard were placed, or linden bark was interwoven from pole to pole. Sometimes an old fashioned "cord bed" was made by using basswood bark for the cord. On this framework the housewife spread her straw tick, or piled the luxurious mound of her home-made feather bed. Such a sleeping place was usually known as a "prairie bedstead", but sometimes it was called a "prairie rascal".

Beds of this sort, however, were for the grown-ups. Children were stowed away for the night either in low, dark attics, among the horns of elk and deer, or in trundle beds which would slip under the larger bedstead in the daytime.

It was easy enough to improvise tables, bureaus, and chairs. Often a packing box answered the purposes of the first two, while smaller boxes of the same kind served as chairs. Real chairs were seldom seen in the early cabins; but in their place long benches and stools were made out of hewn planks. These stools were often three-legged because of the difficulty of making four legs so that all would touch the uneven floor at the same time. The benches were but hewn slabs with a couple of stakes driven slantingly into each end on the under side; and the tables, in some instances were simply larger and higher benches.

In one corner were the loom and other implements used in the manufacture of clothing; while the clothing itself was suspended from pegs driven in the logs. As there was no storehouse, fitches of bacon and rings of dried pumpkin were suspended from the rafters. Over the door was usually hung the rifle and with it the powder-horn and hunting pouch. Luxuries were rare even among well to do people and seldom was there so much as a strip of rag carpet on their floors although they might have large tracts of land, numerous head of stock and many bushels of corn.

Occasionally one found on the frontier a cabin with more complete and comfortable furnishings. Mrs. Semira A. Phillips describes as follows her uncle's cabin in Mahaska County:

Their cabin had but one room, but that room was larger than cabins generally were. I think now it was eighteen feet wide and twenty feet long. I know they had in it four ordinary sized beds, and a trundle-bed which was kept under one of the big beds in the daytime and drawn out at night for the children. The style of bedstead used then was so high from the floor to the bed rail that there was ample room under a bed to store many trunks and chests and boxes and bundles. It was customary to hang a valance around which hid all these unsightly things. Women in that day and stage of the country's history learned how to manage and utilize room. My uncle's cabin had a very large fire-place, six feet wide at least. That fire-place was built up, back and jambs with stone and mud. The top of the chimney was of mud and split staves or sticks. The

floor was puncheon and the roof clap-boards. There was a door in the south, a small window in the west end by the fire-place, and another small window in the north. My aunt had a loom and all other necessities for making cloth. While the weather was warm the loom was kept in a shed at the back of the house. That shed had a clap-board roof, and the floor was of elm tree bark laid flat on the ground with the rough side up. My uncle and aunt were both good managers and could make the best of their crude surroundings.

Another account tells of a big cabin with a single immense room below, with whitewashed walls and carefully scrubbed puncheon floor, and a room above for sleeping purposes. An interesting feature of this home is described as follows:

A little way from that big log house was another of less pretensions which was used as a kitchen and dining-room. There was a big wide fireplace with crane and hooks and a long table covered with a snowy cloth.

It is interesting to note that the first three United States Senators from Iowa spent part of their lives in log cabins. George W. Jones came out to Sinsinawa Mound in what is now southwestern Wisconsin in 1827. Returning the next spring, he slept under his wagon one night and the next morning set the ten or twelve men whom he had hired, at work chopping down trees. Two days later he slept in the log cabin that had been completed in that time. He carried up two corners of the house himself —

the first manual labor he had ever done. The cabin was forty-nine by seventeen feet, having an entry of fifteen by seventeen feet. Each room had one door and one window only. The flooring was of planks brought from St. Genevieve, Missouri. When Augustus Caesar Dodge was a boy the Dodge family lived for eight years in a rude log cabin. This home was built entirely from hewn timbers, without a particle of sawed lumber, and was equipped with a puncheon floor and a clapboard roof.

James Harlan, the third United States Senator from Iowa, has given us a description of his boyhood home in Indiana and the account is typical of the methods of house building throughout the Middle West. Their first cabin was made largely from a single tree. The trunk of this tree was five or six feet in diameter, and when the tree was felled, served as the back of the "camp". A few feet in front two forked branches were driven into the ground, a beam placed across the forks, and smaller poles were laid from this beam to the trunk of the tree. This structure was then covered with strips of bark, several feet in length, overlapping like shingles, and the sides were hung with bed-clothing. This makeshift was replaced in about a week by the more typical log cabin. This must have been a busy week for in that time the father of Harlan had not only collected the materials from the forest and with the assistance of six neighbors raised the walls; but he had completed the further tasks of chinking the logs,

building the fireplace, and constructing a stairway to the loft.

When Robert Lucas, first Governor of the Territory of Iowa, visited Iowa City in 1839, the most commodious cabin in the town served as his headquarters. It boasted of an attic for a lodging room, and into this loft one must climb, by means of a primitive ladder, through a very small opening in the upper floor.

Among the historic cabins of Iowa which are still existing, that of Antoine Le Claire is perhaps the most memorable because of the events that transpired there. At the signing of the treaty with the Sac Indians in 1832, the section of land on which the treaty was signed was set aside and given to Le Claire on condition that he build his home thereon. Soon after, while there still was no city of Davenport, Le Claire erected what was then a most pretentious home. The house was built of hewn logs, boarded over. It was a story and a half high with three gables. To-day the house stands at the rear of 420 West Fifth Street in Davenport. After it was moved, a second story was added and the roof replaced. This building might not be recognized as a log cabin but for the fact that here and there the siding has been torn off revealing the logs of the first story.

The old log cabins of the early settlers in Iowa have now all but disappeared. They have been replaced by less picturesque though more practical

dwelling. Once in a while a vacated cabin is to be found among the trees along the river or on the sheltered slope of a prairie hill. In some cases, the old houses are still seen among the farm buildings, somewhat away from the present house and now used as summer kitchens or work shops. Others, after three quarters of a century, are still occupied — standing as a mute testimony of work well done.

MILDRED J. SHARP

Comment by the Editor

WEATHER

As far as the weather goes we are all communists. It rains on the just and the unjust, and the sunshine has no favorites. And so, being the common possession of mankind, it is not surprising that it is the common topic of conversation, and that "good morning", "bon jour", "buenos dias", and the like furnish the customary greeting the world over. As a topic it has its good points. It has variety and is spiced with adventure and excitement in the form of cloudbursts, tornadoes, and blizzards. Its future is an unfailing subject for speculation; its present is a convenient and unresisting object for our curses, and its past is a prime field for reminiscence.

Mr. Williams' story of an early Iowa blizzard has raised in our mind a few questions we have often asked but never have had answered satisfactorily. Is the country changing its climate? Is there less snow and a milder temperature than in the good old days of sleigh-riding and Thanksgiving skating? Or does our mellowing memory recall only the high lights — the occasional drifting of snow over the fence tops and the dropping of the mercury into the bottom of the tube — until we think of these phenomena as the ordinary winter program?

To try to satisfy our curiosity we have spent a

little time burrowing among the early meteorological reports and the recent reports issued by the Iowa Weather and Crop Service. We have not emerged triumphant but here are a few facts: Professor T. S. Parvin published in the *Report of the Geological Survey of the State of Iowa* for 1870 a discussion of the climate of Iowa with tables based on careful records kept by him, first at Muscatine and later at Iowa City, for the years 1839 to 1869. With regard to temperature he states, "During a residence of more than thirty years in central eastern Iowa, I have never seen the mercury rise to 100 degrees nor fall below 30 degrees". The lowest temperature he records as -30° , on January 18, 1857, during the same bitter winter in which Mr. Williams' blizzard occurred, and in which, two months later, terrible weather prevented Major William Williams and his relief expedition from immediately following up the band of Inkpaduta which had perpetrated the Spirit Lake Massacre.

Professor Parvin makes a tabulation of annual and monthly snowfall by inches for a period from 1848 to 1869 inclusive. The average annual snowfall for this period was 33.23 inches, the highest was 61.97 inches in 1868, the lowest 7.90 in 1850. The greatest monthly fall of snow in the period was in December, 1848, and amounted to 29.52 inches. Apparently this nearly exhausted the supply for in the two years immediately following (1849 and 1850) the totals for the entire years were only 9.41 and 7.90 respectively.

Turning now to more recent times, it appears that much lower temperatures are occasionally to be found. The Iowa Weather and Crop Service recorded in December, 1917, a temperature of 40 below zero, and in January, 1912, the thermometer at Washta in Cherokee County was reported as registering 47 below. This month of January, 1912, was commented upon by all observers. Professor A. J. Smith at Iowa City reported it to be the coldest month since observations began at that station in 1858, over a half century before. The average annual quantity of snowfall for the State in inches is reported by the Iowa Weather and Crop Service. For the ten years from 1909 to 1918 the average annual snowfall never was less than 23.4 inches nor more than 49 inches. The average for the ten years was 32.67 inches. And yet the Report for 1912 states that at Earlham in Madison County the station recorded a total amount of 77.2 inches for the year.

But these are only sample figures. To draw conclusions one must go deeper and wider. We recommend the subject as an interesting and useful one for study.

J. C. P.

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