

From New York to Iowa

The following account of a progression of migratory steps from New York to Iowa was related by Mrs. Lydia Arnold Titus in a series of letters to her grandson, Bruce E. Mahan. It is a story that runs through several generations, for the movement was a halting one and the stops along the way were sometimes rather extended. But it is typical, and to-day most of the men and women of the Middle and Far West, looking back along the line of their ancestry, see a succession of events which at the time and to the actors themselves appeared spasmodic and unrelated but which to us seem to fit into the inexorable working out of the westward migration by which the American people possessed themselves of the continent.

I was born in the year 1840 about thirty miles from Buffalo and three miles from a small village by the name of Machias Corners in New York State. My home was a log cabin on a farm where father by hard toil made a living for himself, my mother, and the six children.

The schoolhouse where I started to school at the age of five was a small one-room log building about three-fourths of a mile from our home. On my way

to school lived a kind-hearted old lady who would often come to the door of her cabin and call for me to stop. Then she would fill my apron pocket with nuts and give me a big red apple or some cookies. Although it has been over seventy-five years since this happened, the kind words and pleasant smile of this dear old lady are as real as though the meeting occurred yesterday.

My first book was a speller. We had to learn every letter before we could read easy words. There were no maps nor blackboards, and the seats were merely rough planks with holes bored in for the legs to fit. They had no backs. For the older boys and girls who studied arithmetic and who had copy books, desks had been made along the wall. Every morning the teacher would take the copy books and write a line at the top of the page for the day's lesson. Then the scholars would take their goose-quill pens and write while the teacher helped the little ones with their letters. Then we had counting lessons. After we had learned to read, the teacher started us on the capitals of the States. It was a proud day for me when I was able to name every State and its capital.

At recess time and at noon we would play a game called "Catch the Ball". The balls used were made at home out of yarn unravelled from old stocking feet and covered with soft leather or cloth. On pleasant days when wintergreen berries were ripe, our teacher would allow us to go and gather them.

How we did enjoy the cool sweet flavor of the winter-green! In the winter time our outdoor sports consisted of skating or sliding down hill on sleds made by our father or brothers. There were no sleds for sale at the store in Machias Corners.

In those days father always made his own maple sugar. It was fine fun in the early spring to go with him to the sugar camp, to watch him tap the trees, gather the sap in pails, and boil it down. My sisters and I would get a pan of clean snow and when the sirup was boiled down almost to sugar, pour some of it into the pan of snow. As the sirup cooled it became hard and brittle and we had the best sort of maple candy. We always had plenty of pure sugar. On our farm, too, we had a good variety of fruit: apples, cherries, currants and plums. Wild blackberries were plentiful also.

In the year 1847, my mother's health began to fail, and father, thinking that a change of climate might help her, decided to go West. He sold our farm and stock during the next year and, packing a few things into a wagon, hired a man to take them and us to Buffalo. There we loaded our goods on a boat and sailed up Lake Erie to Toledo, Ohio. After a short trip into Michigan to visit my mother's relatives who had come West some years before, father decided to settle down on a farm in Williams County, Ohio. Mother failed to improve and so when spring came again we moved to another farm near Adrian, Michigan. After living here a short time, father

decided to try the climate of Illinois. He had heard glowing reports, too, of its crops from a brother who had settled there.

Father bought a yoke of oxen and a new wagon. On this he built a frame work, fastened bows, and covered them with canvas. Then we loaded our cooking utensils and bedding, an ax, a log chain, and a few household goods and set out in the year 1850 for Knox County, Illinois. Before we came to the end of our journey both oxen became sick, so we stopped for a time at a small place called Aux Sable. After a week or so the oxen got better and father sold them. There were no railroads in that part of the country and so my brother, then a boy of sixteen, walked from there to Rio, in Knox County, to get his uncle to come after us with a team. Several days passed before they returned to take us to our new home. On this journey we stopped overnight at taverns along the way as mother was not strong enough to stand camping out, but we cooked our meals by a campfire. One day each week we stopped by a stream or near some farmhouse to do our washing.

After we arrived at the home of my uncle near Rio we visited with his family for a few weeks, then father rented a farm. During the first fall he helped pick corn for his neighbors, getting every third load for picking it. The next year he raised a big crop of corn, wheat, and oats; but it was hard to get ahead as the price of all grain was so low. And

in the absence of railroads in that part of Illinois it was difficult to get the grain to market. I have seen corn fenced up in rail pens and allowed to stay there until it rotted. It could not be sold at any price. All of our neighbors had come from the East, hoping to get a new home at a low price. Some liked the new country, but others sold out, packed up, and returned to their native States.

My sisters and I started to school again when we settled down in our Illinois home; and, after taking all the work offered in the country school at that time, three of us started to teach. My salary was eight dollars per month and I had to board round at the homes of my pupils, a week at each place; and since the nearest home was one mile from the school-house I think I earned my wages.

One event that happened the same fall that I started to teach school stands out in my memory. Far and wide the news spread that Stephen A. Douglas and Abraham Lincoln would hold a debate at Galesburg on October 7, 1858. The girls near Rio decided that we would attend the debate in a body. Accordingly, we decorated a hay wagon and each girl made a banner to carry with the name of a State on it. I chose New York as that was my native State. We limited our party to thirty-two, the number of States in the Union at that time. As most of us were Republicans we made one large banner with the slogan "Rio, Lincoln, and Liberty".

The day of the debate dawned bright and clear and

we made an early start for it was sixteen miles to Galesburg. Each of us was dressed entirely in white, and each carried the banner inscribed with the name of the State which she represented. Two men drove our six-horse team and a third carried our large banner. Our drivers passed every team in sight for most of them were only two or four-horse outfits, and with all of us yelling and shouting the miles rolled past rapidly. When we had gone about seven miles on our way we overtook three girls walking, who seemed glad to accept our invitation to hop aboard the "Lincoln Express". However, they proved to be Democrats and before we arrived in Galesburg, they said they wished they had walked. We stopped just outside the city by a stream of clear cold water to eat our lunch and to water our horses.

Our outfit was among the first to arrive at the park where the debate was to be held. A short time before it began, we marched in a body down close to the small platform where Mr. Douglas and Mr. Lincoln were seated. Lincoln sat in a splint-bottomed chair, and it looked as if his knees were up to his chin, the chair was so low and his legs were so long. When he saw us and our banners he arose and stepped down from the platform to shake hands with each girl and to say a word of welcome to all.

Soon the debate began. The crowd had to stand as no benches had been provided. Although the discussion lasted two hours and a half or three hours

none of us girls left our place down in front. I think Mr. Douglas was the better orator, but of course I felt that Mr. Lincoln was right. On our way home we laughed and sang, and arrived at Rio tired but happy.

I taught school in 1858, 1859, and in the fall of 1860. During the summer of the latter year I met Mr. Francis Titus at the home of his uncle, and in the fall we began to keep company, as it was called in those days. He had moved West from Pennsylvania to Ohio, living there for a time near Mt. Gilead, and from there had come to Illinois about the same time that father was making the trip from New York to Illinois. We lost little time courting and were married March 21, 1860, just a little more than a year before the Civil War broke out.

On a rented farm a few miles from Rio we began housekeeping. My first furniture consisted of a set of plain chairs, two wooden bedsteads, a big dry-goods box made into a cupboard with a curtain hung in front of it, an old cook stove and a kitchen table. My dishes, tub, and washboard cost six dollars. Of course, I forgot to buy a rolling pin and in a few days we had company for dinner. I wanted to make biscuits but for the life of me, couldn't think of what to use for a rolling pin. Finally I thought of an ear of corn, so out I went, found an ear, washed it and rolled out my biscuits. They were not very smooth but they tasted good just the same. I made all our bedding and paid for it out of money I had

earned teaching school. Father made me a potato masher and a butter ladle out of hard maple and I have them yet.

Our stock consisted of two horses, a cow, and three pigs. About harvest time one of our horses died and my husband had to buy another one. As all his money was tied up in the crop he had to give a note for the horse. It cost him \$100 with interest at ten per cent. When the year was up he had no extra money after paying his debts, but he had three hundred bushels of corn which he turned over to the man at ten cents per bushel. The next fall he turned over four hundred more bushels of corn at ten cents a bushel, and finished paying for the horse the following year with corn at the same rate. In all, the horse cost over a thousand bushels of corn.

We rented for six years and then bought eighty acres nearby. On this we lived three years more. Every fall while we lived in Illinois my husband went with a threshing machine till snow fell. The first year he received \$1.50 per day for himself and team, and thereafter was paid at the rate of \$2.00 per day. The third fall after we were married he purchased a machine and horse power of his own, and ran this every fall, oftentimes up to December. With the money he made threshing we later purchased our land in Iowa.

In the year 1869 we decided to sell out and move to Iowa where land was cheaper. My youngest sister and her husband made up their minds to go with

us; and so we sold our farms and livestock, keeping only a wagon apiece and four horses. My sister had a baby girl six weeks old and I had three children, the youngest a girl of ten months, a son three years old, and a daughter eight.

Just as my father had done nineteen years before in leaving for Illinois, we placed a covered frame on each of the wagons, loaded our bedding and a few cooking utensils, and started for Iowa. It was a great adventure to the older children just as my trip from New York had been to me, but the babies were too young to care much about it. At night we camped out, cooking our meals by a camp fire. We fried home-cured ham or bacon with eggs, and we boiled potatoes or roasted them in the hot ashes. Our bread we purchased from farmers along the way. At night we slept in the two wagons which were roomy enough for all.

When we reached the Mississippi River, we found that we had to go down stream to a little town called Shokokon to take the ferry. It took half a day before we landed on the Iowa side at Burlington as the boat had to be towed up the river some distance.

After a fifteen days' trip overland we reached Bedford, Iowa, then a small town with a few frame store buildings and a handful of small houses. We rented a two-room house in town until we could buy our land and build on it. We bought 200 acres of fine prairie land four miles west of town, paying \$6.25 an acre for it. To get lumber for a house it

was necessary to haul it fifty miles from Afton where the Burlington railroad then ended. Our first house on the farm consisted of two rooms, one for a living room and a bedroom, the other for a kitchen and dining room. Sometimes I had to make a bed in the kitchen when company stayed overnight, but although we were crowded, we were all well and happy so it didn't make much difference.

Year by year we worked hard to improve our farm, fencing it, planting fruit trees, berry bushes and grape vines, and setting out a maple grove for shade. In a few years we had an abundance of apples, cherries, peaches, plums, blackberries, raspberries, and grapes. Our twenty acres of timber land which we bought in addition to the farm furnished us with the best of oak and hickory wood for fuel, and posts for fencing.

We saw the country change almost overnight, it seemed, from raw, unbroken prairie to a settled community with schools and churches. We saw the coming of the railroad, the building of roads and bridges, and the growth of the nearby county seat from a scraggly village to a thriving, up-to-date town with all the improvements of a city. We passed through the period of high prices following the Civil War when calico cost forty cents a yard and flour \$6.00 per hundredweight, then the period of low prices and money scarcity of the nineties. Our land constantly increased in value until to-day it is worth about \$300 per acre.

Whenever I go out to the old homestead, I picture in my mind's eye the happy days when we were young and strong, and the children were little tots setting out across the fields to school. My husband passed away not long ago at the age of eighty-two and I am past eighty. I am waiting now as patiently as I can to hear the call once more "to go West".