

Frontier Fun

Although the social life of the pioneers was meager, nevertheless, some play varied the monotony of steady toil on the Iowa frontier. After an early settler had cut logs for his cabin and had dragged them to the site of his new home neighbors for miles around were invited to the "raising." While the men were engaged in laying up the walls of the cabin women prepared as bounteous a dinner as the family larder would permit. When the task was finished the men engaged in friendly bouts — wrestling, foot racing, and feats of strength.

Soon after the cabin was finished the neighbors assembled again to dedicate the new domicile with a "house warming." Some one in nearly every neighborhood could "scrape the fiddle," and the new cabin re-echoed to the strains of "Money Musk," "Old Dan Tucker," "The Arkansas Traveller," "Old Zip Coon," and "Pop Goes the Weasel." The Virginia reel, the stately minuet, and the old-fashioned cotillion were favorite dances. If the settler who owned the cabin had scruples against dancing some other sort of frolic, such as the "play party" with "Miller Boy," "Skip to My Lou," "Old Sister Phoebe," and "London

Bridge" as popular games, furnished fun more vigorous than graceful.

For those pioneers who made their homes in the wooded areas "log rollings" provided another useful mode of recreation. When the settler had laboriously felled the timber on a considerable space of ground his neighbors joined him in rolling the logs into piles for burning. The task finished, a supper for all and an evening of jollification celebrated the successful destruction of the logs.

Hunting was a sport much enjoyed by men and boys on the Iowa frontier, for game was abundant and the old muzzle loader was a deadly weapon in the hands of pioneer marksmen. The "circular wolf hunt" furnished both fun and excitement. On an appointed day all the men and boys of a neighborhood would form a sort of a circle around many square miles of territory. Dogs were held in leash by their masters until a signal was given to turn them loose, when away they would go barking and yelping after the quarry. The hunters gradually closed up toward the center of their field of operations, gathering not only wolves but other game as well. No guns were used on such occasions, but every hunter carried a sturdy club.

On Saturday afternoons in the fall of the year shooting matches frequently brought the marksmen of a neighborhood together in a test of skill. A beef, divided into five parts, might be offered as prizes, the best shot taking first choice while the

hide and tallow went to the man in the fifth place. At other times a haunch of venison, wild turkeys, a pony, a gun, or a watch was the prize sought. Each contestant brought along his own target, a charred board with a bit of white paper in the center. At a distance of fifty paces for offhand shooting, or seventy-five if a rest was used, the pioneer marksman took steady aim and fired his old muzzle loader. Judges called the result of each shot, and the glad news, "Broke center" or "Drove center," for a perfect bull's-eye was welcomed with shouts of acclaim.

Horse racing, too, was thoroughly enjoyed by the early settlers. In certain communities nearly every Saturday afternoon during the summer and fall and often on Sundays a crowd of men assembled to witness running races. Trotting and pacing had not yet become the vogue. There was much betting, and pocket knives, watches, guns, and sundry articles as well as money changed hands.

Quilting bees and paring bees afforded a means of social recreation for women and girls alone; but the husking bee brought both sexes together for a good time. These affairs were usually held in a barn where the host had placed two piles of corn as nearly equal in size as possible. As soon as each gentleman had selected a lady partner and sides had been chosen for the contest, the husking began, each group striving to finish its pile of corn

first. Finding a red ear meant kisses all around, and sometimes young men would take an underhand advantage by secretly passing a red ear from one to the other. This feature of the program was particularly agreeable and a source of unlimited fun and frolic. After the corn was all husked the floor was cleared, the "fiddle" was brought out, and the merrymakers danced until the eastern sky began to show signs of the coming dawn, when each boy on horseback with his girl behind set out for home.

Dancing was probably the most popular form of social intercourse among the young people. The portable bedstead, loom, spinning wheel, table, and provision barrels were moved outside the cabin and chunks of wood with slabs resting on top were arranged along the wall for seats. Couples arrived at "early candle lighting." The fiddler tuned his instrument, and shouted, "Git your pardners fer a cuttilyun." Then, keeping time with his feet, head, and body, he called the figures of the dance, the more complicated the better. "First four forward, and side four divide; change partners in center, and swing to the side; and keep on around," started the rhythmic shuffle. "Ladies to the center, and gents walk around; pass by your partners, and swing 'em around; and all promenade," brought a prompt and not ungraceful response. "On to the next one, salute and sashay; and double shuffle, the old-fashioned way;

and grand right and left." And so the fun continued till morning.

Fourth of July celebrations brought the pioneers together for a day of relaxation, visiting, and feasting. A convenient grove usually served as the place of meeting, to which the settlers came afoot, on horseback, or by wagon from miles around. A bountiful picnic dinner spread on the ground was served at mid-day; while in the afternoon some well-known lawyer made the welkin ring with his impassioned eloquence. Perhaps a ball in the evening concluded a day of community fun.

Thanksgiving day with its wild turkey roasted golden brown over the coals of the fireplace, wild plum preserves, corn pone, mince pie, and bowls of cracked hickory nuts, butternuts, and walnuts afforded simple pleasure for the pioneers. On Christmas, gifts of a practical sort such as knitted mittens, stockings, mufflers, caps, and hoods were given to the children. Sometimes a little girl found some colored beads in the toe of her stocking and a boy was made joyous with a brand new jack-knife. Meager as such gifts were the spirit of Christmas prevailed and happiness reigned.

Pioneer fun was often rough and not very refined, but it was not vicious. It reflected the simple tastes of the early settlers and afforded some relief from the dull routine of securing a living.

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