

Religion and Morality

The Iowa pioneers were, in a sense, materialists. They had need of food, clothing, and shelter, and none of these could be secured without hard, grinding labor. The settlers endured these hardships because they had visions of future farms, new houses, and herds of cattle, but there were many who had ideals above economic necessities and who knew that "man shall not live by bread alone."

The frontier along the Mississippi, like the frontier everywhere, attracted a lawless and turbulent element. Charles A. Murray, an English visitor at Dubuque in 1835, wrote that the barroom "was crowded with a parcel of blackguard noisy miners," but he added, "theft is almost unknown; and though dirks are frequently drawn and pistols fired in savage and drunken brawls, I do not believe that an instance of larceny or house-breaking has occurred."

The majority of settlers in Iowa were industrious and law abiding. They made their own tools and furniture, and if necessary formulated their own laws and provided their own religious services. As early as 1834 a little group of Methodists erected at Dubuque the first church building in

Iowa. This little log church was "raised," we are told, "with few hands and without spirits of any kind" — a procedure apparently not according to the prevailing custom. Services were held in a cabin, in a store, or outdoors.

George C. Duffield, in describing an open air meeting on the west side of the Des Moines River in August, 1837, relates that the preacher, a Baptist, "strode down toward the water's edge, and, turning toward the rising bank, took off his hat and laid it at his feet." The congregation gathered on the bank, and the women, "who sat bonneted beneath the tree, bared their heads." Perhaps a hundred persons, including Indians, listened to the sermon, of which Mr. Duffield said: "I seldom pass that elm tree to this day but that I unconsciously look at its roots as I did that day at Mr. Hill's direction when he screamed: 'Oh sinner, look! *Look* (bending with hands nearly to the ground) while I take off the hatch of *Hell!*' and with his long bony fingers and writhing body he pictured the tortures of the damned."

Simplicity and fervor were, indeed, the most marked characteristics of many of these early church services. One of the western preachers once visited a church in Massachusetts and his comment on its services throws sidelights on the church of the frontier. "There's your old wooden god, the organ," he said, "bellowing up in the gallery, and a few dandified singers lead in singing

and really do it all. The congregation won't sing, and when you pray, they sit down instead of kneeling." The method of seating the congregation also fell under his condemnation, for he said, "The evils that result from mixed sittings of male and female, which are always attendant on the pew system, are neither few nor small."

The religious hysteria which had swept over the West at the beginning of the nineteenth century had largely disappeared by the time Iowa was settled, but camp meetings, where whole families came and stayed for several days, were not uncommon. Exhortations, prayers, tears, and shouts of praise mingled at these meetings, the repressed existence of the lonely and hard working men and women finding relief in the expression of religious emotion.

Probably no class of men on the frontier suffered more privations and hardships than the pioneer preachers and priests. They made long circuits to reach their appointments, driving or riding horseback through the heat and rains of summer, shoveling their way through snowdrifts in winter, or dragging wearily through the mud of the early spring. The best paid received only a pittance and many of them helped support themselves and their families by other work.

Education was not deemed a necessity for this work, although some of these missionaries were well educated for their time. Noteworthy in the

religious history of Iowa was the coming of the "Iowa Band," graduates of the Andover Theological Seminary, who came to Iowa in 1843. Their expressed determination was that each should found a church and all a college. From their efforts arose many Congregational and Presbyterian churches and Grinnell College. Father Mazzuchelli, educated and talented, was one of the best-known Catholic priests in early Iowa.

But there were other and less orthodox influences in the religious life of pioneer Iowans. From Nauvoo, Illinois, came Mormon missionaries; Quakers settled in southern Iowa, bringing with them implacable hostility to slavery; and Abner Kneeland attempted to found an atheistic colony near Farmington, naming it Salubria.

Along with this confusion of religious readjustment the problems of moral standards developed. To Iowa came the outlaw and the missionary, the Puritan from New England and the former slaveholder from the South, the white man and the Negro. The Indian was already here. In combining these groups Iowans had one advantage: their ideas and moral standards had to some extent been filtered by sojourns in Ohio, Kentucky, or Illinois, and frontier hardships helped to establish mutual helpfulness and tolerance.

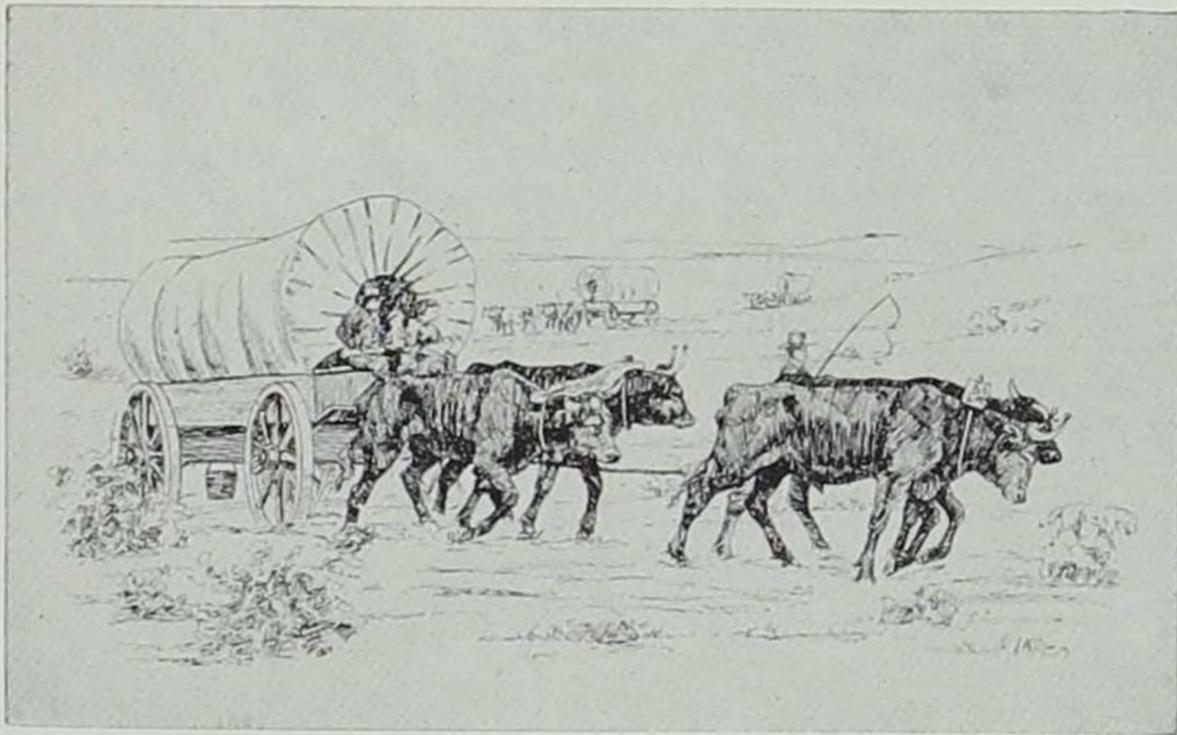
Perhaps some idea of the moral standards of the majority of early Iowans may be derived from a glance at some early laws. In 1839 the legislature

provided a fine of fifty dollars or less for any person who should "by menace, profane swearing, vulgar language, or any disorderly or immoral conduct" interrupt any religious assembly.

Governor Robert Lucas, in his message to the First Legislative Assembly of Iowa, began the fight against two evils by announcing that he would not appoint to office "any individual of *bad moral character*, or, that may be addicted to *intemperance or gambling*." Lotteries, which in many sections of the country were not only permitted by the government but often conducted by it, were forbidden by all three of the constitutions framed for Iowa. Lottery tickets, however, contrary to this constitutional provision, were sometimes advertised in Iowa papers. In 1842 gambling debts were declared to be void. Hunting, fishing, and working on Sunday were likewise forbidden by law.

Divorces might be granted for such causes as bigamy, adultery, desertion, cruelty, or drunkenness and were the same for husbands and wives. Until 1846 divorces were also granted by the legislature, one act in 1842 divorcing eighteen couples. In spite of this, divorce in pioneer Iowa was looked upon with disfavor: wives were expected to be patient and obedient, according to St. Paul's advice, the courts usually considering the father's right to the children paramount.

The settlement of Iowa occurred about the time of the rise of the temperance movement, and



From Cloz's *Reminiscences of Newcastle*

Covered Wagon — On the Way to Iowa

The covered wagon is a symbol of the westward advance of the pioneers into Iowa. In his *A Glimpse of Iowa in 1846*, John B. Newhall records:

The great thoroughfares of Illinois and Indiana, in the years of 1836-7 . . . would be literally lined with the long blue wagons of the emigrants slowly wending their way over the broad prairies—the cattle and hogs, men and dogs, and frequently women and children, forming the rear of the van—often ten, twenty, and thirty wagons in company. Ask them, when and where you would, their destination was the "Black Hawk Purchase."

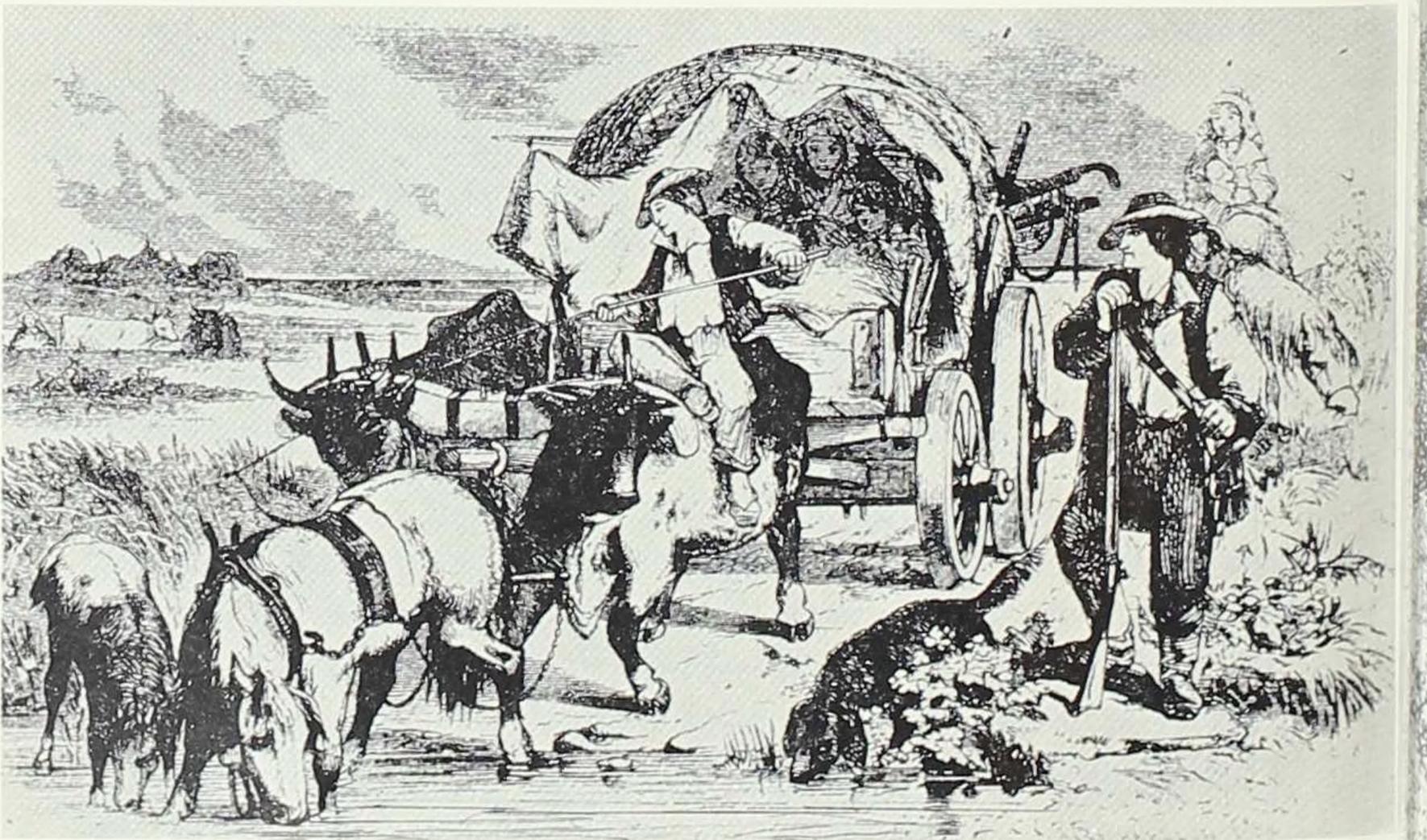
During a single month in 1854 fully 1,743 Iowa-bound wagons passed a point beyond Peoria, Illinois. The following year a traveler saw forty-nine wagons from Michigan, "bound for Iowa," cross an Illinois stream.

During 1855 the *Burlington Telegraph* chronicled six or seven hundred immigrant teams daily. "About one team in a hundred is labelled 'Nebraska;' all the rest are marked 'Iowa.'" The rush into northern Iowa was recorded in the *Dubuque Reporter*:

Day by day the endless procession moves on—a mighty army of invasion. . . . Tarrying no longer amongst us than is necessary for them to select their future home, away they hie to the capacious and inviting plains. . . . Soon will be seen innumerable the farmer's comfortable abode, and the frequent thriving village, with its "people's college," as its highest worldly pride, and close at hand the house of God. . . .



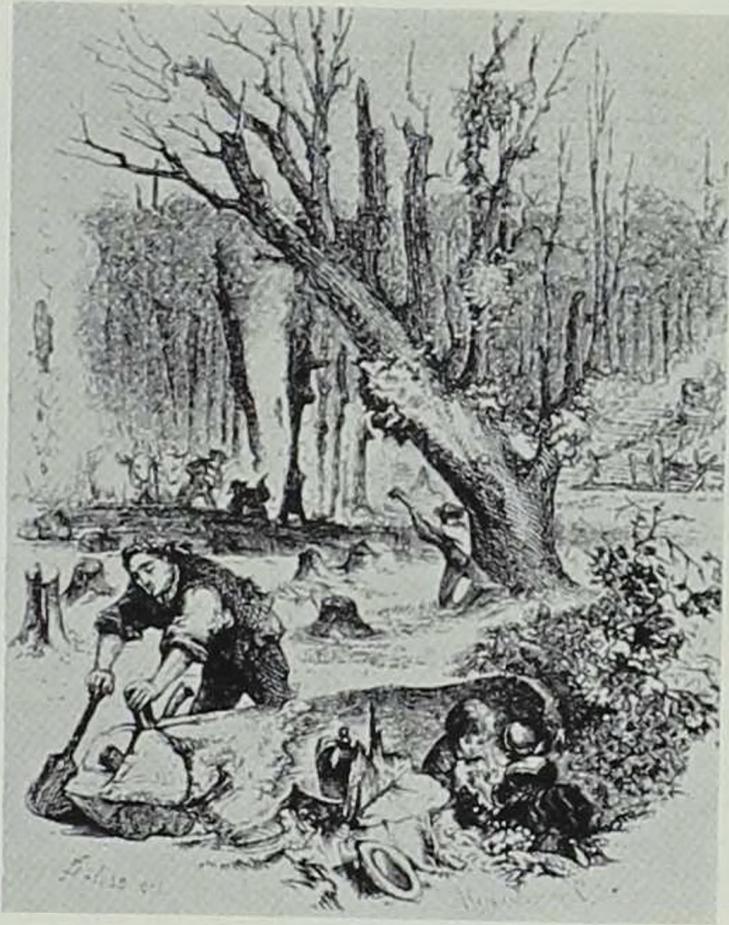
Foreign emigrants came West from Northern Europe.



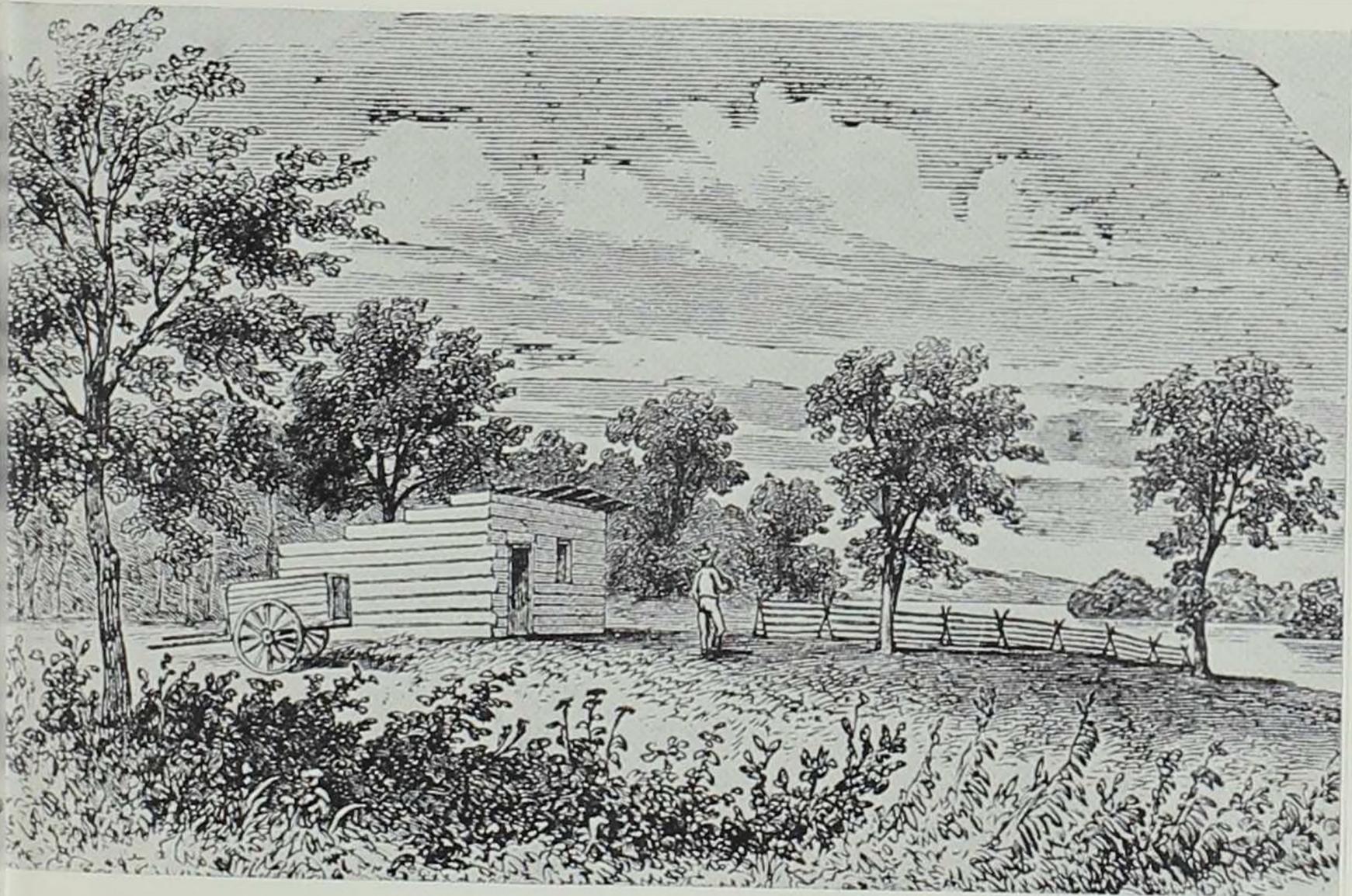
American pioneers pause to refresh themselves and their thirsty animals.



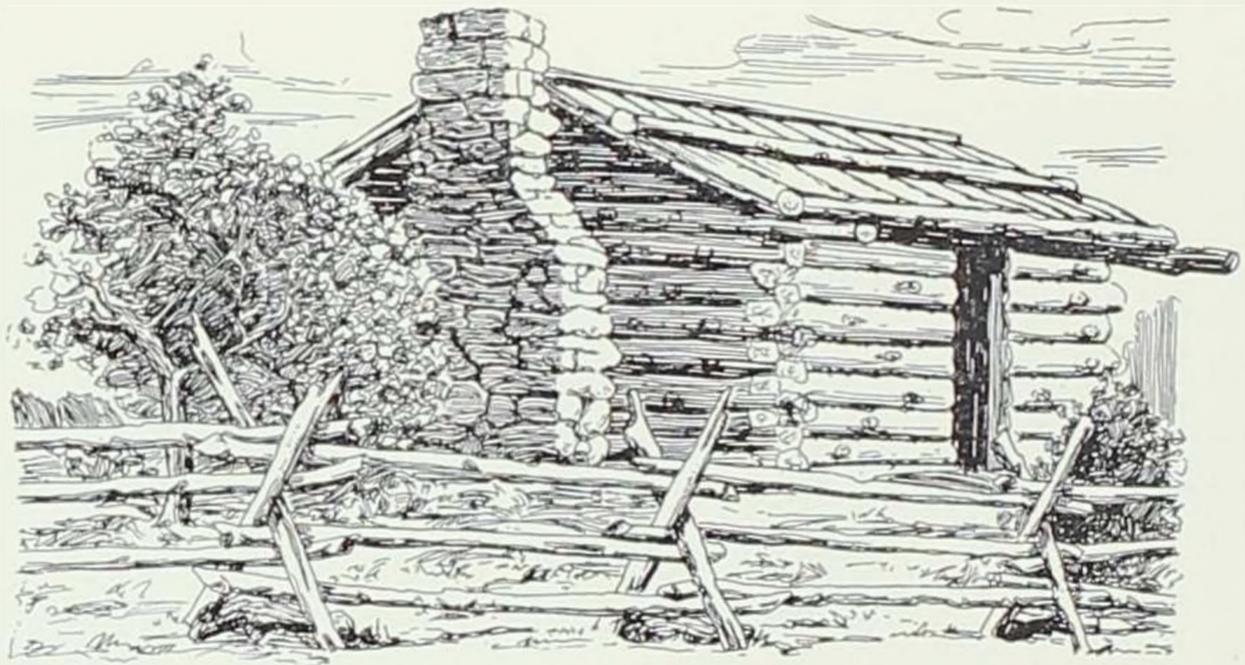
Pioneers encamp for their evening meal and rest.



Making a clearing in the forest.

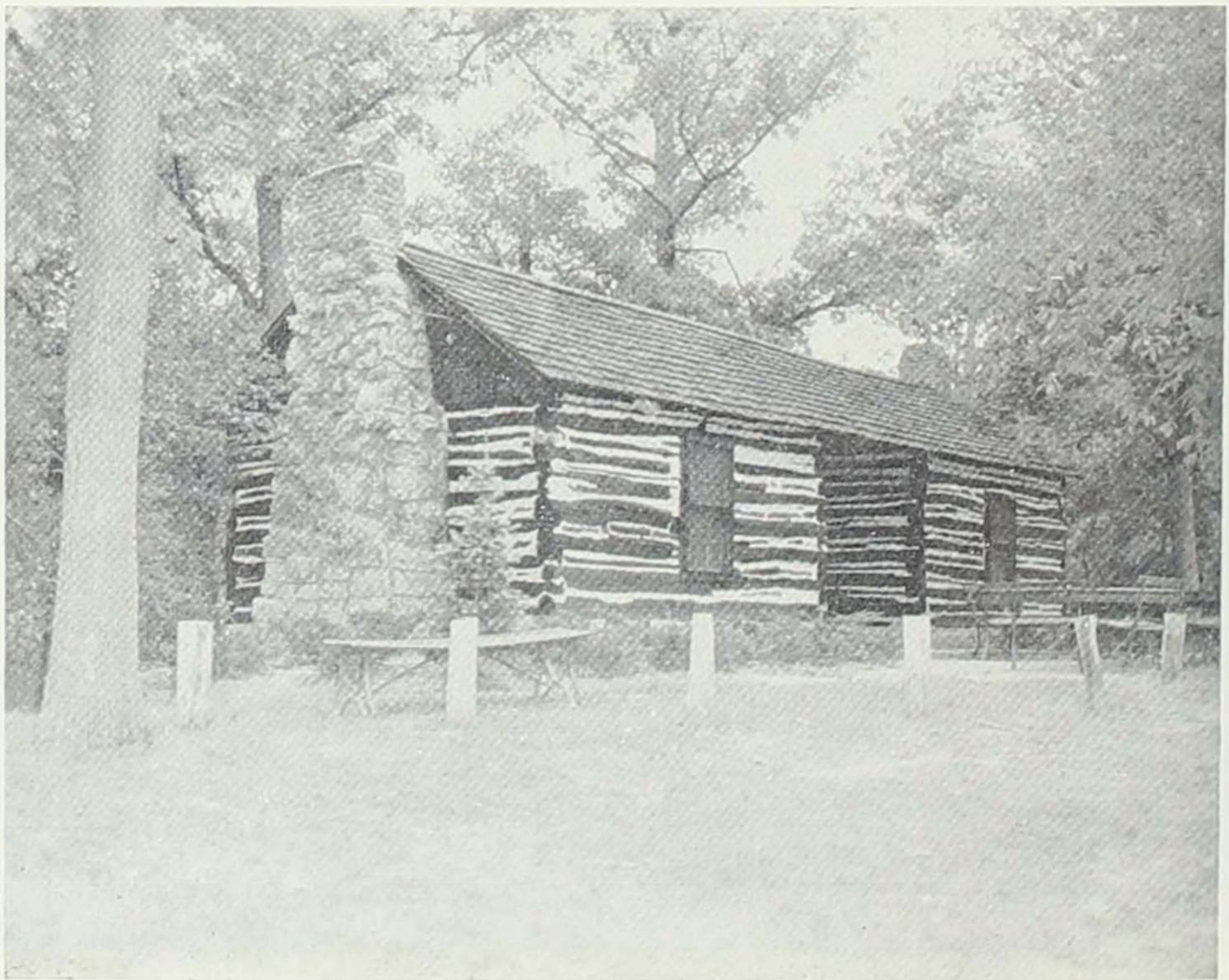


An early log cabin home on the prairie.

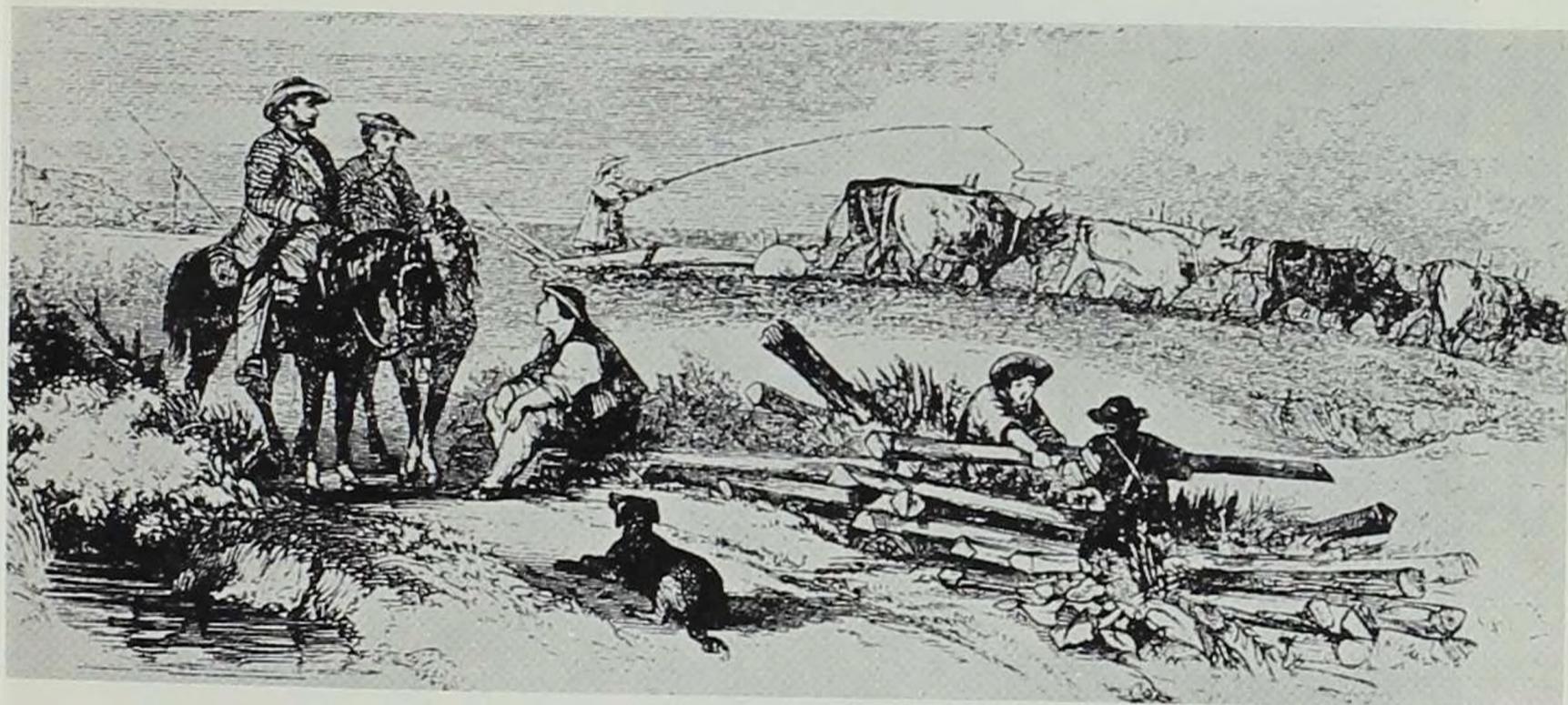


From Cloz's *Reminiscences of Newcastle*
A Pioneer Log Cabin

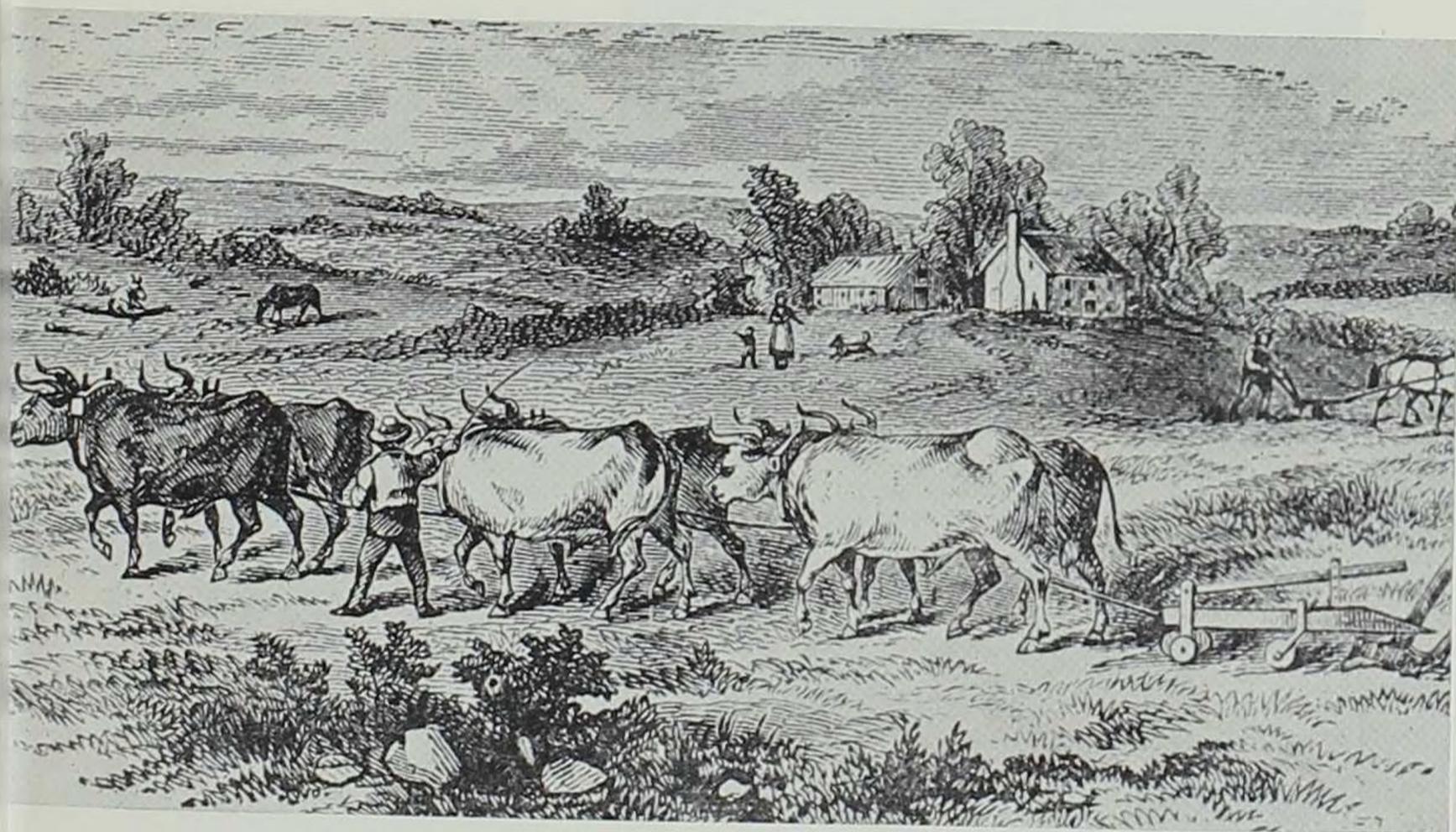
The log cabin symbolizes the youth of the frontier, a youth through which every Iowa community had to pass. It was usually rough hewn—as rough as the pioneer himself. It had the strength of the pioneer in warding off attack, or in sheltering him from rough weather. It symbolized independence and it exemplified the spirit of cooperation through the old-fashioned “log-raising.” It served not only as home but also as a church, courthouse, hotel, school, and as a center for quilting bees, singing schools, and other social functions.



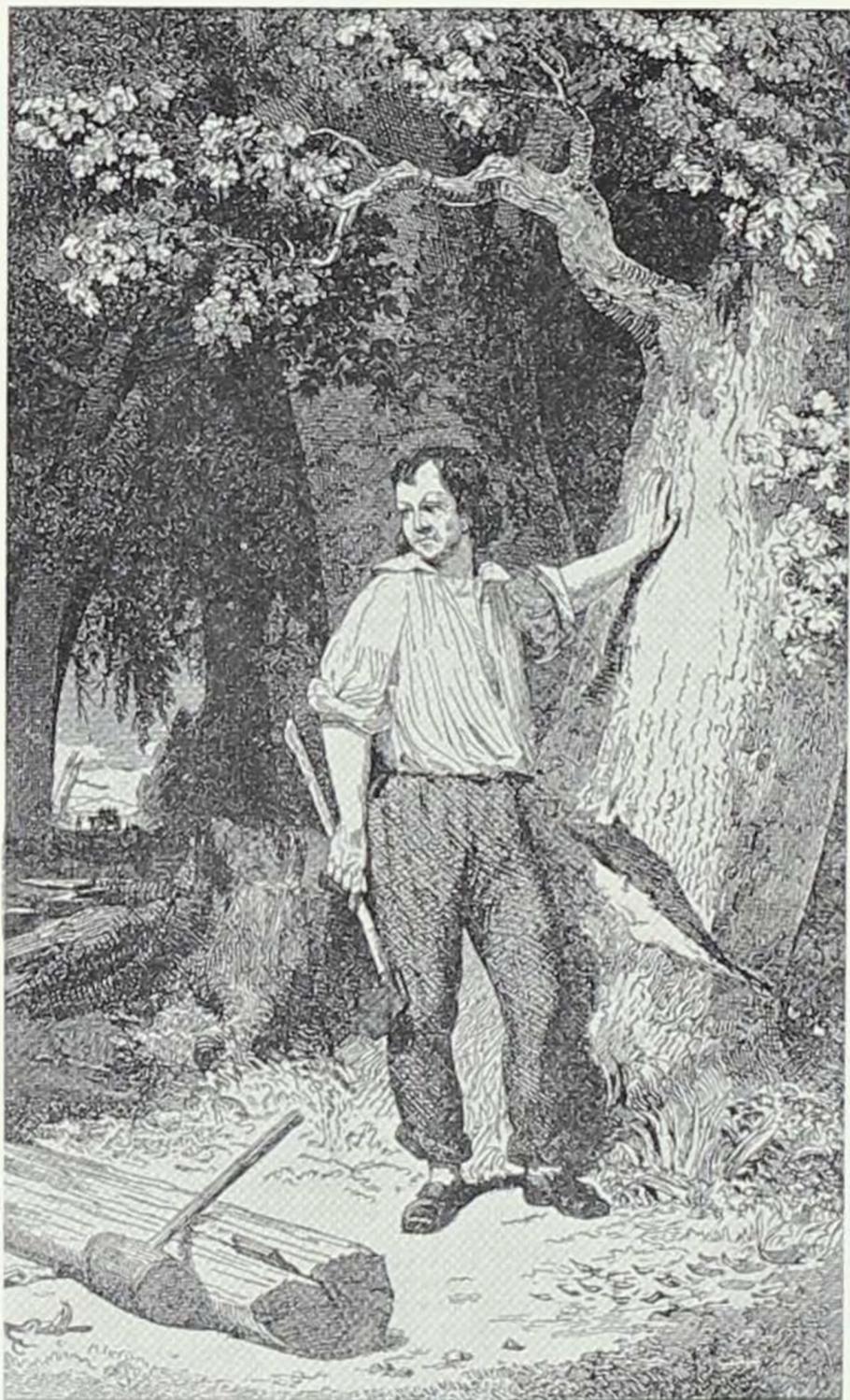
From the *State Historical Society Collections*
The oldest log cabin in Iowa—at Dubuque.



Oxen were the primary source of power for the farmer.



From the State Historical Society Collections
Breaking prairie with oxen in pioneer days.

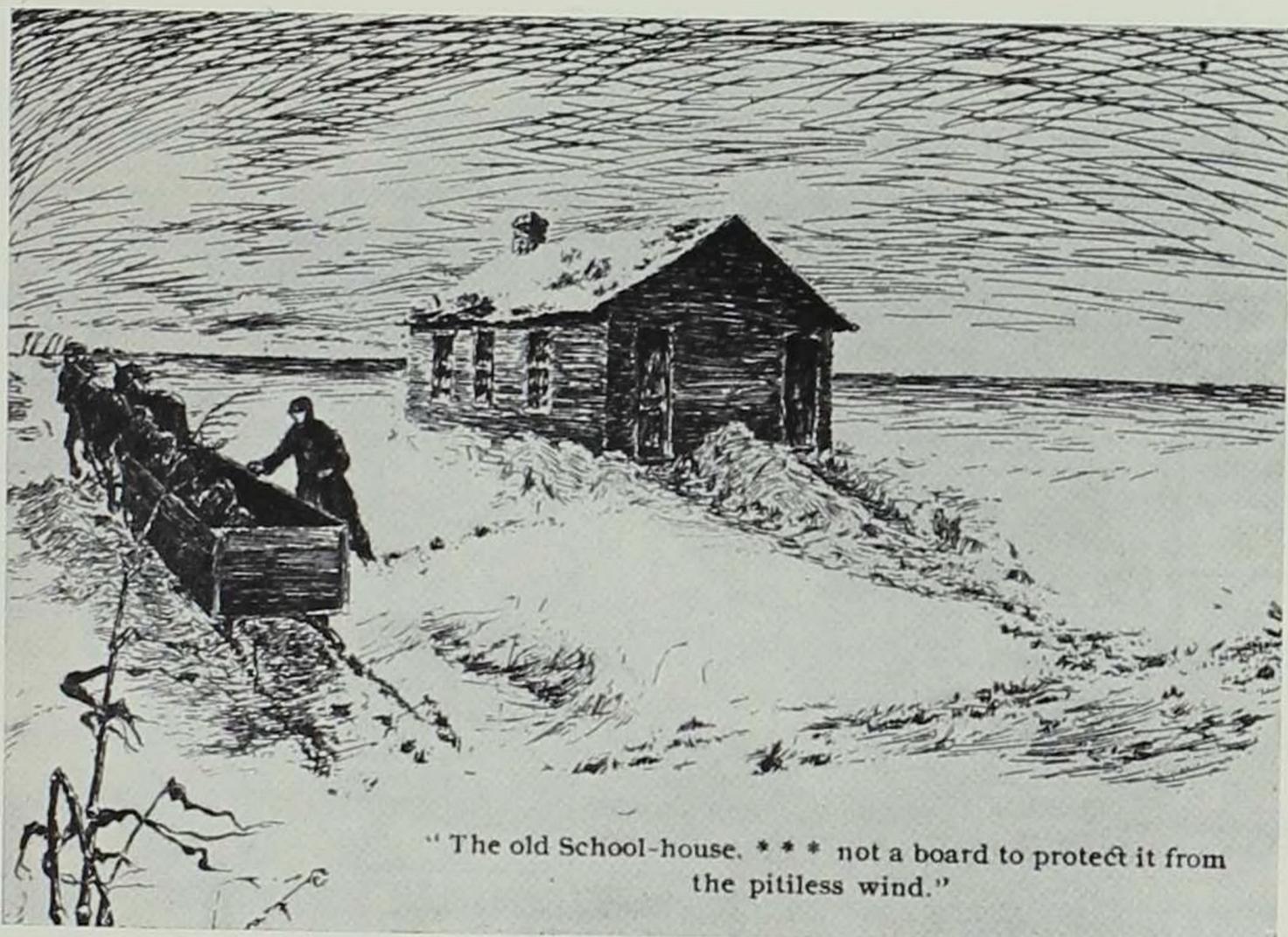


THE PIONEER AND HIS AXE

"There stands the young and vigorous pioneer, buoyant with hope and high expectations of the future, stripped for the mighty contest between human strength and the giant forest-sons of nature. With his axe in hand he stands alone in the midst of the vast wilderness, far from the hallowed associations of youth and the charities of home and of neighborhood, prepared to prostrate the umbrageous forest and admit the life-giving sunbeams to the exuberant bosom of mother earth. . . . His axe was his trusty claymore, his young wife—his country's honor—universal freedom—these composed his oriflamme to encourage him in the heat of battle; and his cause

was the cause of religion, humanity, truth, equity and freedom. With such a weapon, such a rallying standard, such a noble incitement, did the hardy pioneer wrestle with the gnarled oak and towering beech till they were overcome, and luxuriant grainfields like a green oasis in the midst of the desert, gladdened his heart with the smiles of abundant prosperity. Where he had recently fought his victorious battle, a village uprose, a monumental trophy of his prowess; and from eastern lands—lands where his ancestors dwell—the commercial marts upon the borders of the sea—he hears the echo of his song of triumph, and beholds a mighty tide of physical and intellectual strength flowing on in his track, to populate, beautify and enrich the domain he has conquered, and to rear and foster there other pioneers to push farther onward toward the sands of the great Pacific.

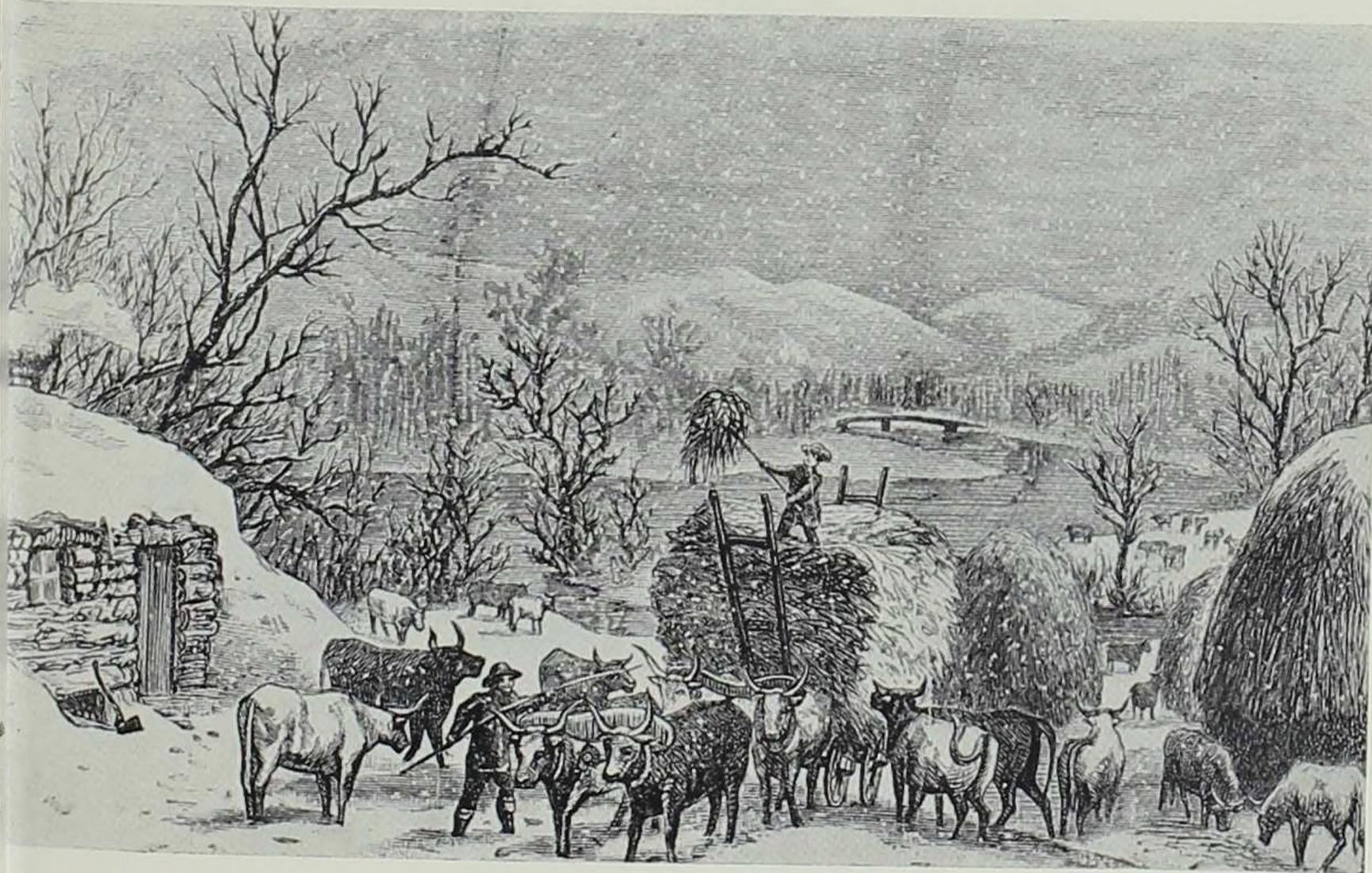
The Family Magazine (1840)



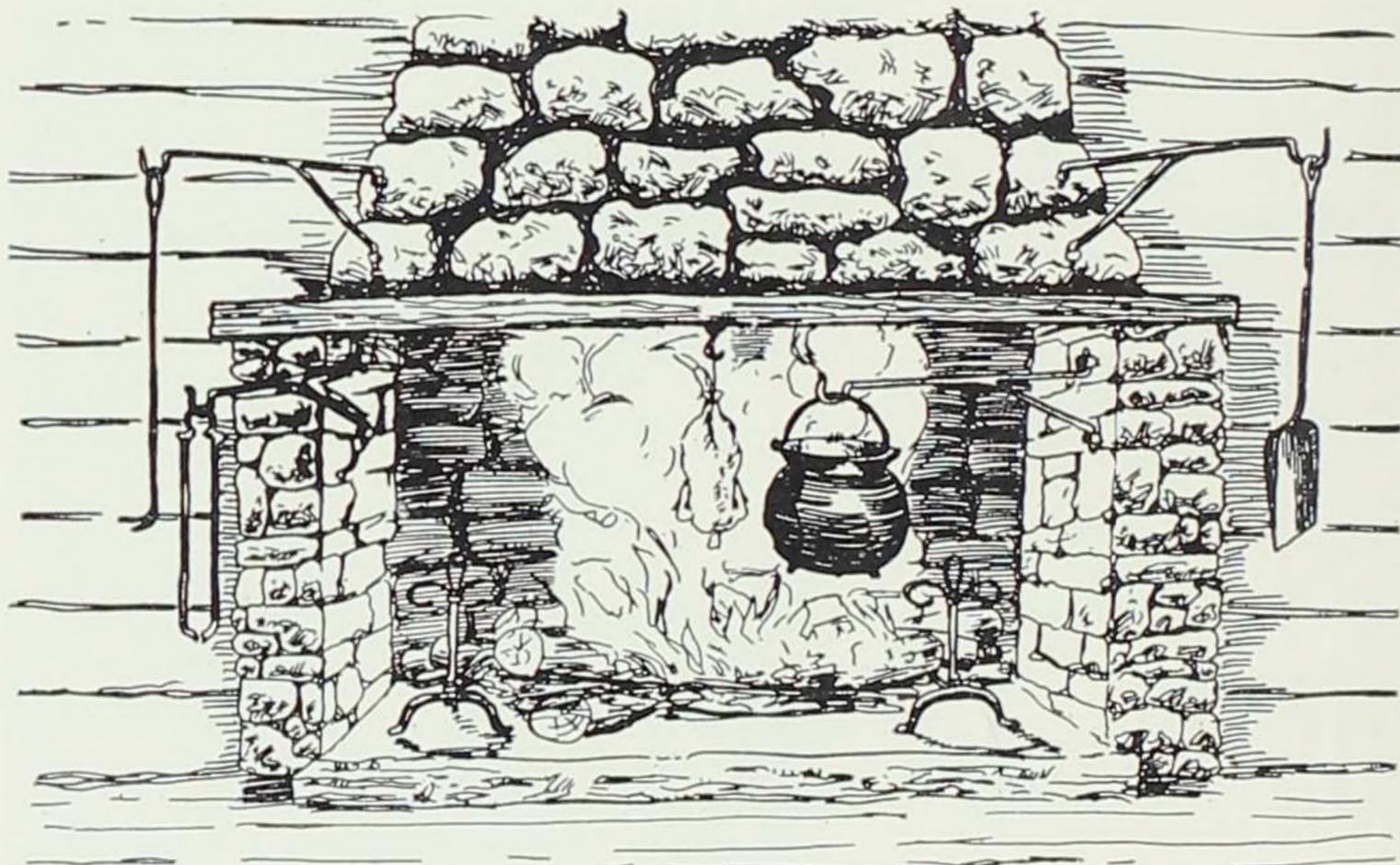
"The old School-house. * * * not a board to protect it from the pitiless wind."

From the State Historical Society Collections

Pioneer school in winter time.



Winter scene in pioneer days.



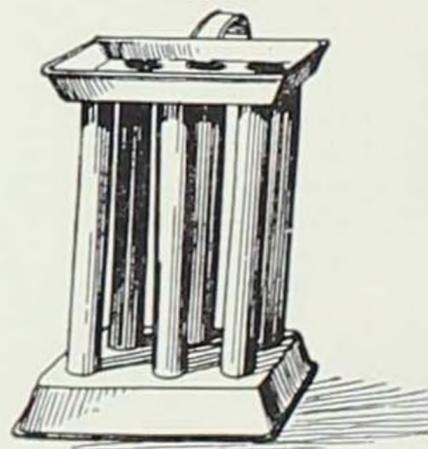
A fireplace of the 1850's.



Saucer Light
Turnip Light

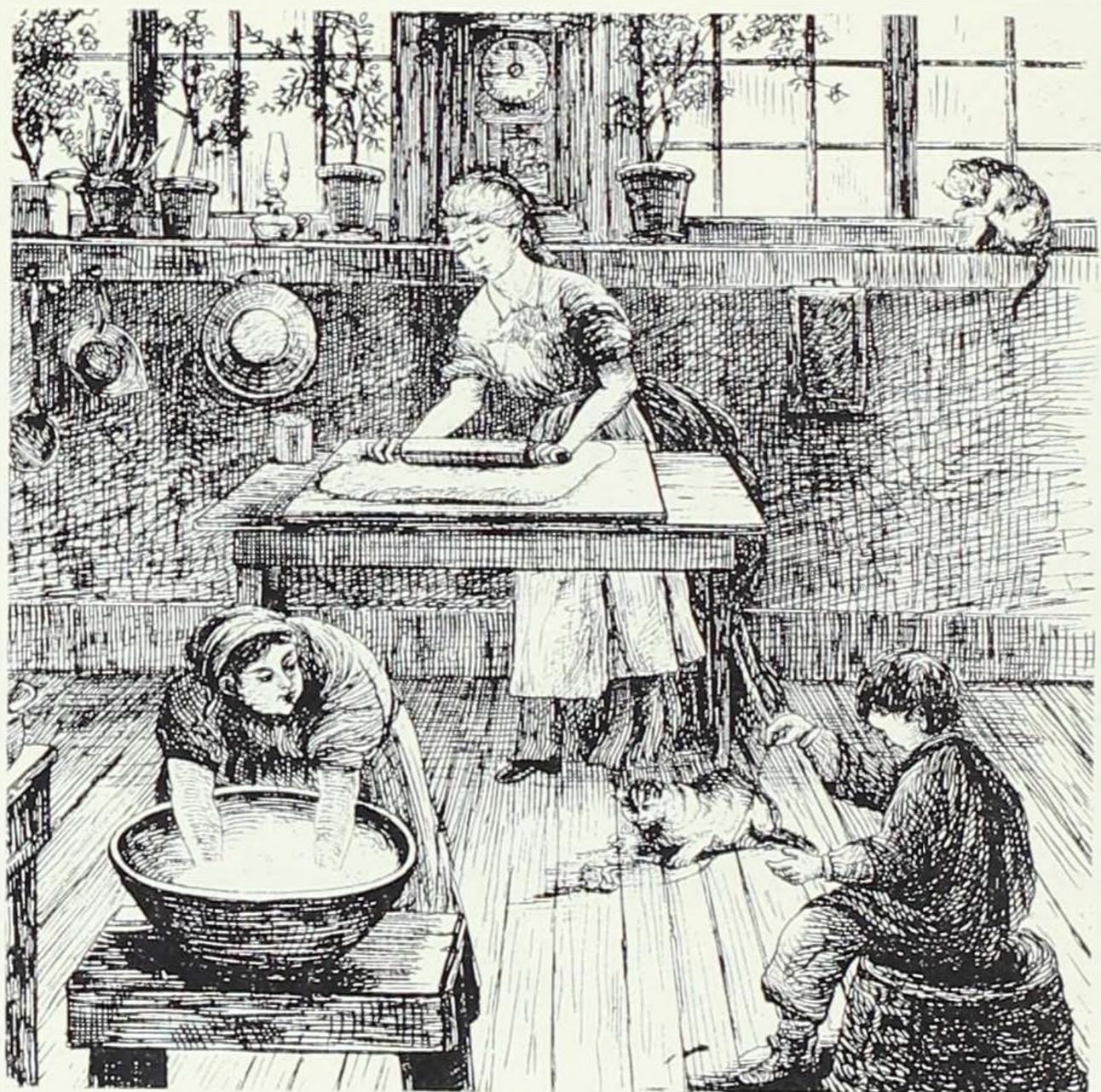


Tallow Dip

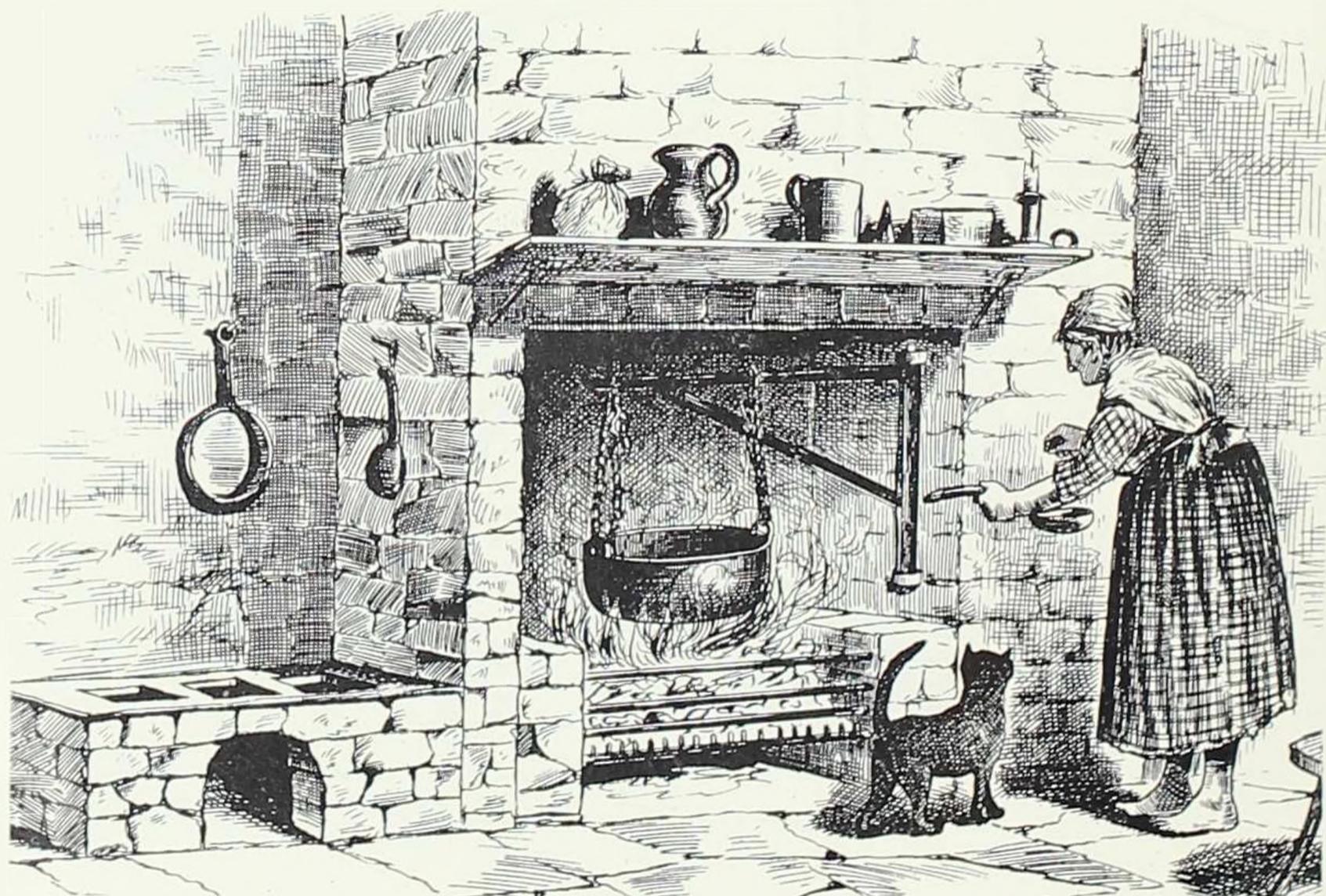


Saucer Light
Candle Molds

From Cloz's *Reminiscences of Newcastle*



Pioneer women mixing and rolling bread dough.



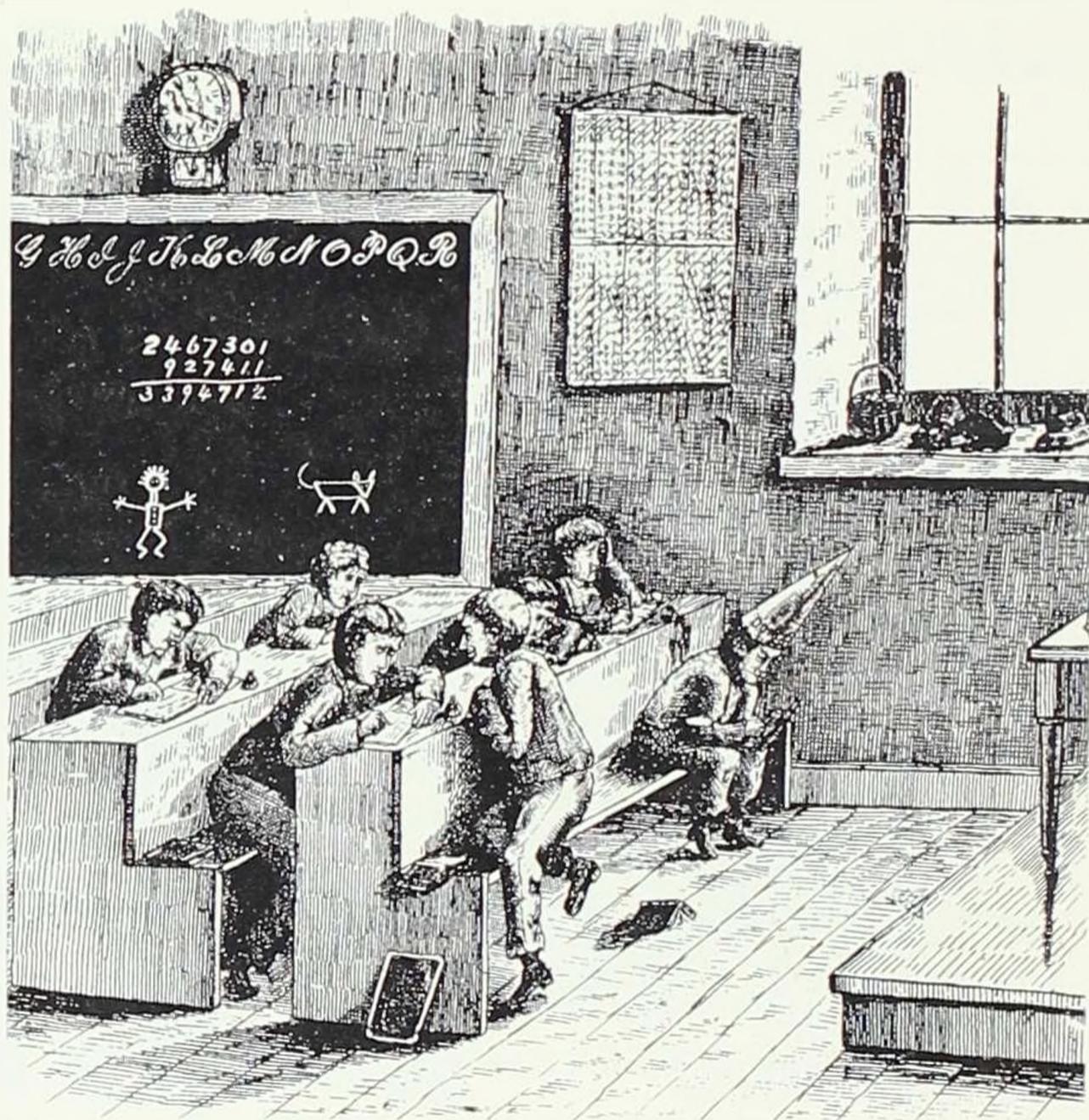
From Butterworth's *The Growth of Industrial Art* (1892)
Preparing food in an open hearth.



The wooden washtub was still in use in the Twentieth Century.



From Butterworth's *The Growth of Industrial Art* (1892)
Flat irons were in every home — A woman's work was never done.

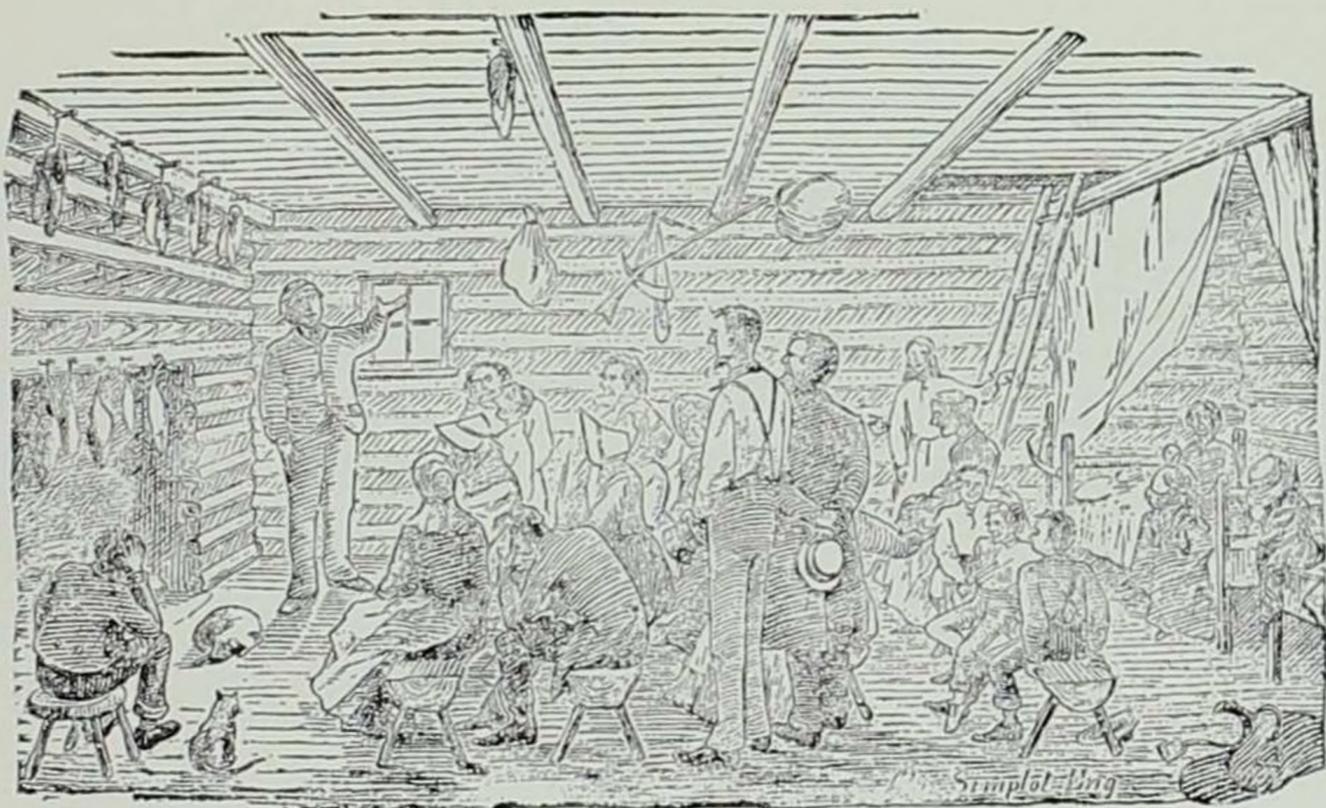


The longform desk, the blackboard, the slate, and the dunce cap were a part of every school.



From Butterworth's *The Growth of Industrial Art* (1892)

Soap-making was a yearly family activity.

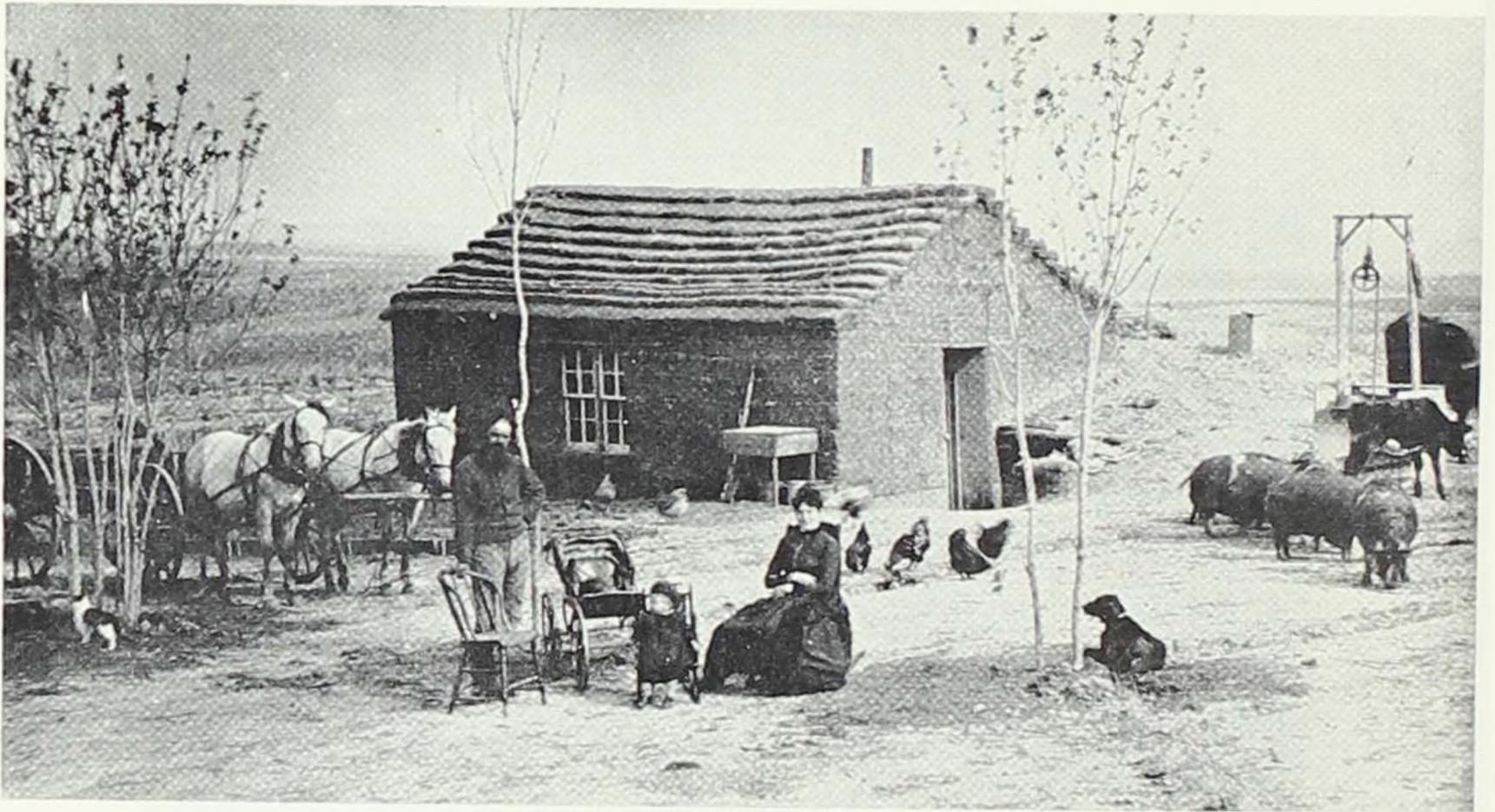


From Rittenhouse, *Boyhood Life in Iowa* (1880)

Sermon in Father Simeon Clark's Log Cabin

In his memoirs of forty years ago, published in Dubuque in 1880, Rufus Rittenhouse describes the log cabin of Father Simeon Clark, and the soul-searching sermon he heard there in 1840.

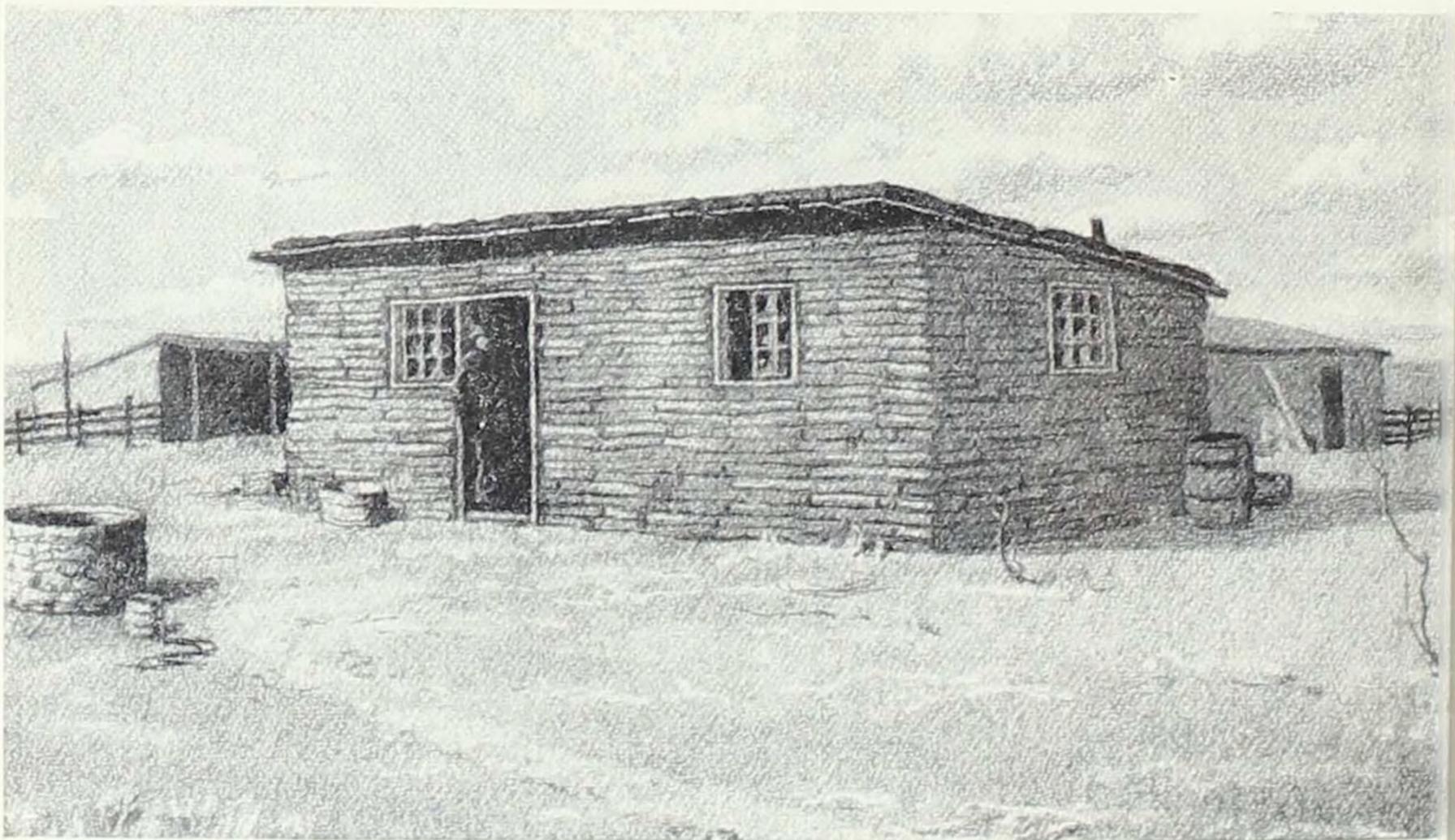
Father Simeon Clark in those days never wore anything but a red handkerchief on his head—I never saw him with anything else and believe no one ever did. He was an excellent rifle-shot and a good bee-hunter; his residence some ten miles west of Dubuque, was built near the end of a deep vale, in a sort of horse-shoe. Father Clark's house may have been fifteen feet by twenty-five, one end nearly all chimney, at the opposite end stood two beds, puncheon floors, doors the same, roof covered with clapboards and ridge poles, small cock-loft overhead. It was in the spring of '40, I was at the house to hear him preach; puncheon benches had been brought in as was the custom, to seat all who might come; there may have been twenty persons present—four or five men, some long gaunt women, and the balance principally children; around the fireplace hung a dozen or more great venison hams swinging to and fro, drying for a time of need. Here Father Clark delivered his discourse, a masterly one. I have many times since listened to more eloquent discourses but never to any so impressive. The reader will pause for a moment and turn to the twelfth chapter and twenty-fifth verse, where he will find in Paul's advice to the Hebrews, "See that ye refuse not him that speaketh." Father Clark dwelt on the depravity of mankind, that all men were sinners, and finally wound up by saying that perhaps not more than two or three in that little assembly would be saved: 'twas a solemn time; Father Clark and Bro. John Paul made two that I was sure would be saved, but as he said two or three *might* be saved, I thought Brother Morrison might make up the three; I looked upon the balance as lost; as for myself I had done nothing to merit salvation; true I had given the Spanish quarter that I had hid in the root house, which my grandfather had given me, for the conversion of the heathen, and though I had taken the preacher for my mother to cook dinner for, I gave myself up for lost.



Courtesy Nebraska Historical Society

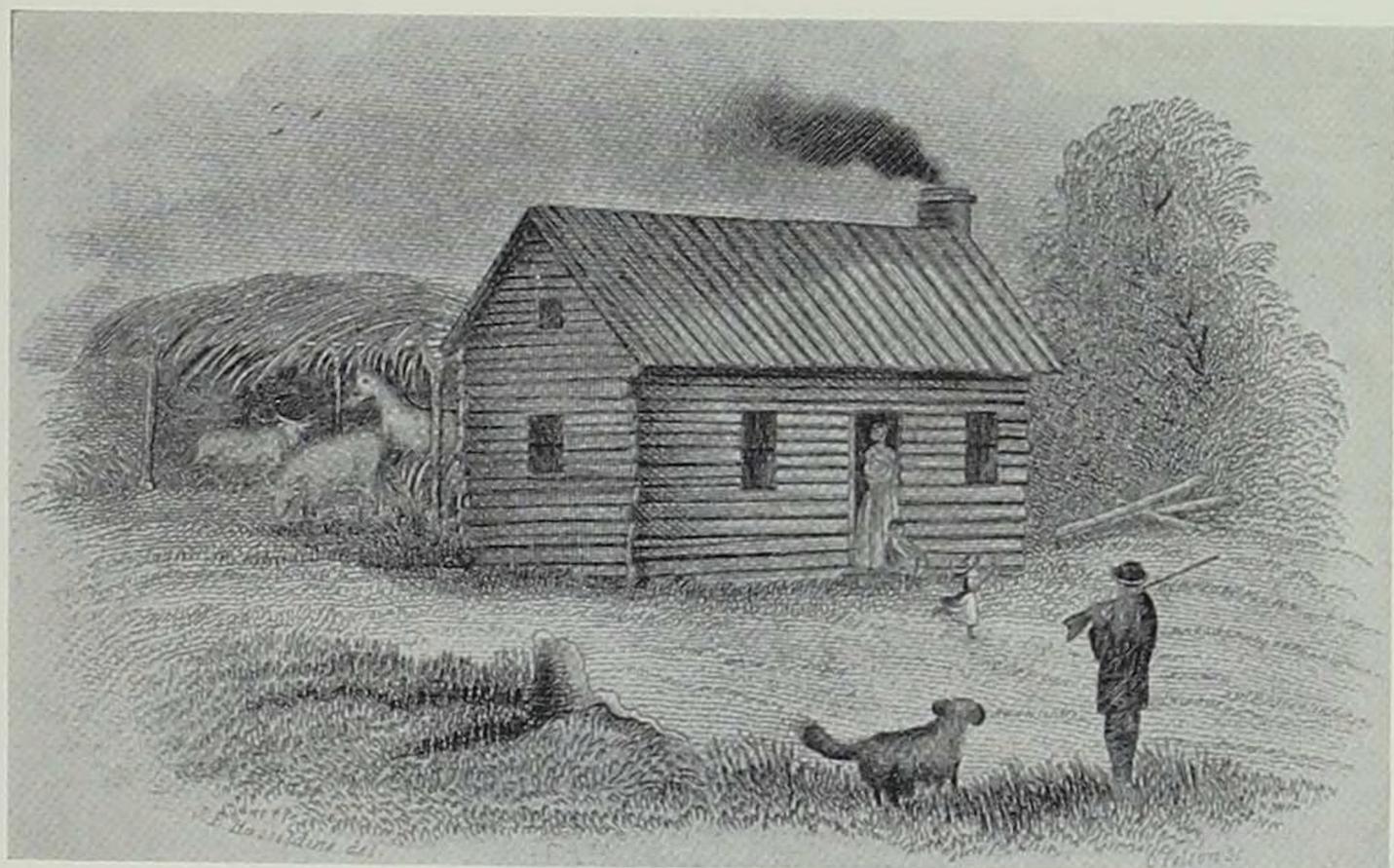
Photograph of a combination dug-out and sod-house in Nebraska.

Mrs. M. A. (Lucy) Tinley of Council Bluffs recalls the old "dug-out" which served her family when they arrived in Nebraska Territory in 1860. It extended three feet into the ground, like the sod-house shown above. "I was born on a Nebraska homestead in 1875," Mrs. Tinley wrote in April, 1968. "Our family had been there since 1860 . . . so I am really a pioneer. Anyway, I like to read about the opening of the West. Our land was ten miles north of Fremont. There were many Indians but by the time I was born their scalping days were fairly well over. However, in my bed at night after the lights were out, it was a fearsome thing to think about."

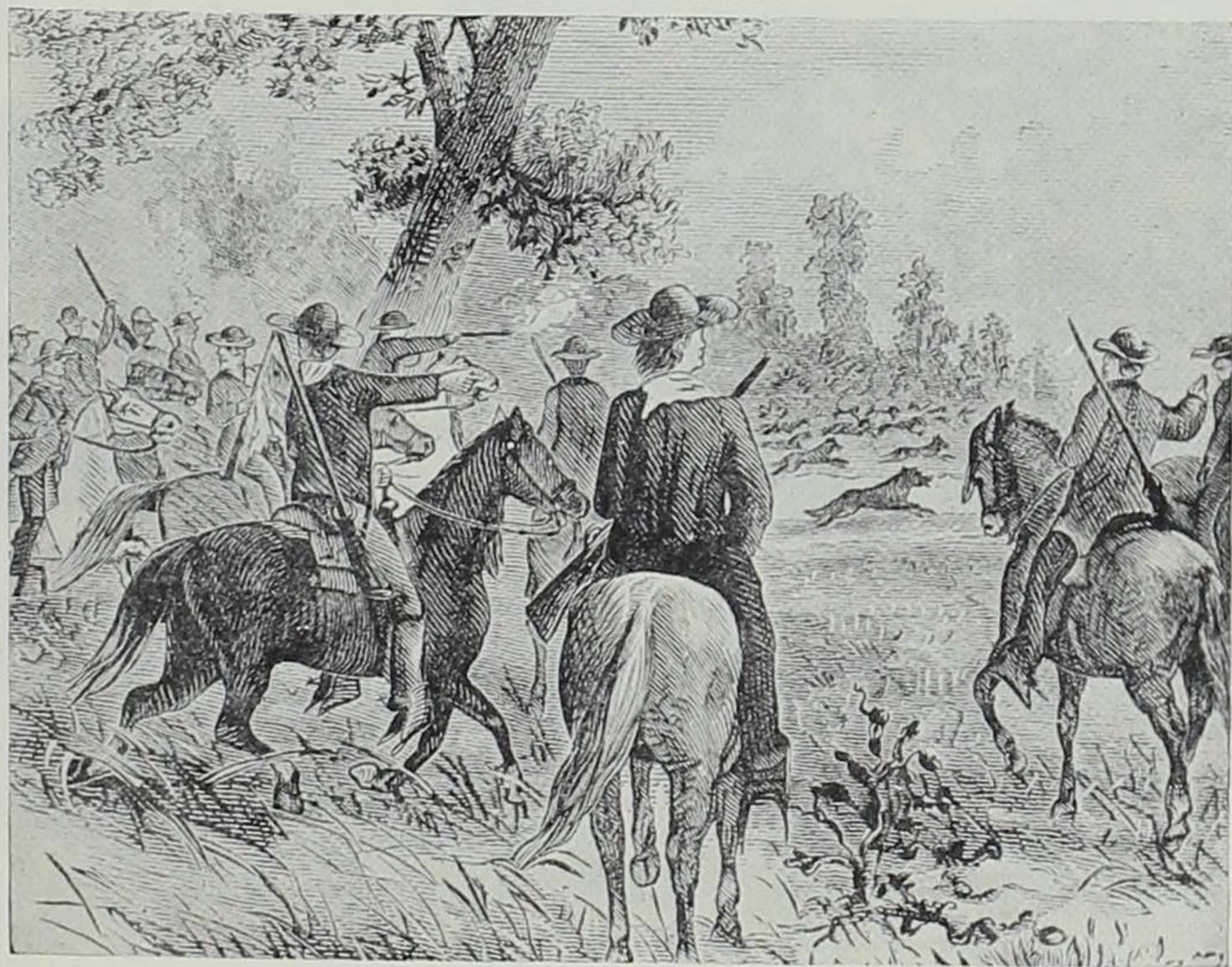


From a charcoal sketch by Edith Bell

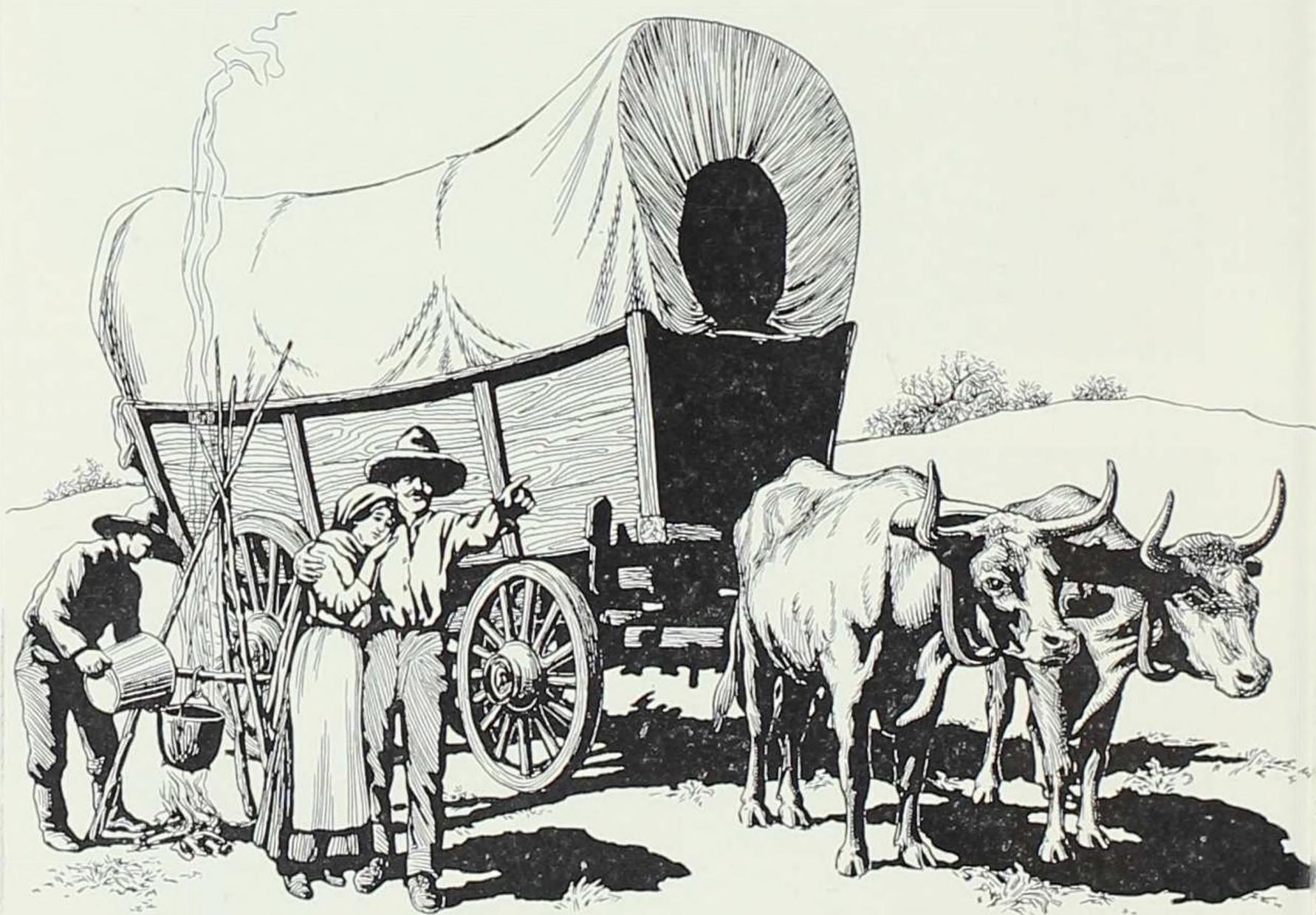
A typical pioneer sod-house common in western Iowa.



From Fowler, *Woman on the American Frontier* (1882)
Return of the hunter.



Circular wolf hunt in pioneer days.



Hexom —

Sketch by Chas. Philip Hexom

Westward, ever Westward, the covered wagon rolled to a promised land flowing with milk and honey. The pioneer points out the trail's end to his tired but faithful wife.

prohibition sentiment developed early here although there were many influences against it. The first temperance society in Iowa was organized a few weeks before the establishment of the territory, and the early laws show many restrictions on the sale of liquor. In 1855 a prohibitory law was ratified by a popular vote of 25,555 to 22,645.

Hospitality was a striking characteristic of the frontier. No cabin was too small to hold the wayfarers who stopped for shelter. The latch string usually hung outside and if the owner were away any traveler was welcome to lodging and food. Theft was unusual except for horse stealing, an offense considered so serious as to be punished under "lynch law" by hanging. Murders were not unusual. Criminals maintained houses at strategic points where the unsuspecting guest was deprived of his "roll" if not of his life.

Both the religion and the morality of pioneer Iowa were characterized by the independent, self-reliant spirit of the frontier combined with cooperation and toleration of the opinions of others. Partly these qualities were the result of environment, partly they were inherited from earlier pioneers who had written in the Ordinance of 1787 the words: "Religion, morality and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged."

RUTH A. GALLAHER