

Claim and Cabin

For many days the ox-drawn prairie schooner moved slowly, slowly westward. Progress, always slow and tedious, was impeded now and again by swollen streams or wide expanses of almost impassable prairie slews. At last, as the shadows of evening lengthened behind the travelers, the weary oxen ceased to strain at the yoke, and the great canvas-covered wagon came to a final halt. The pioneer had arrived. Yet his adventures, hardships, and privations were not at an end. The conquest of the prairie lay before him.

First of all he had to determine the boundaries of his homestead. This was done not by the surveyor's chain, but by "stepping off" certain distances from a given point. Approximately fifteen hundred paces each way was considered to include three hundred and twenty acres "more or less" — the amount designated as a legal claim. The boundaries were marked by driving stakes in the prairie or by blazing trees if the claim was located in the timber. Many of the boundary lines were crooked and not infrequently they encroached upon other claims. But it was understood among the settlers that when the lands were surveyed and entered all inequalities would be adjusted.

Paradoxical as it may seem, in a land without courts or judges, justice prevailed. By honorable adherence to the rights of others, claims staked out in good faith were as secure as property held by law. The Golden Rule governed the rights of the squatters. Local extralegal protection became so general and the claim associations of the settlers were so powerful that it was extremely hazardous for a speculator or a stranger to bid upon a claim which was protected by a "pre-emption right."

To break five acres of ground was recognized in many communities as sufficient evidence of ownership to hold a claim for a period of six months. To build a cabin "eight logs high with a roof" was considered as the equivalent of plowing an additional five acres and was sufficient to hold the claim for another six months. If a newcomer arrived and complied with these "by-laws" of the neighborhood, his rights were almost as much respected as if he had occupied the land by virtue of a government patent.

In June, 1838, Congress established land offices at Dubuque and Burlington and offered to sell the public domain in Iowa for \$1.25 an acre. Settlers who had pre-empted claims hastened to purchase the homesteads they had already established, and woe to the outsider who bid on the claim of a squatter.

The first homes in a new settlement were necessarily very simple. In the prairie country where

wood was scarce and sod was plentiful, the earliest houses were mere sod huts. The materials were obtained by taking a breaking plow into the low land where the sod was heavy and plowing a furrow sixteen to eighteen inches in width. The sod thus obtained was cut into sections about two feet long, which were then laid like brick. The roof was made of large rafters covered with prairie hay or grass, and this in turn was covered with long strips of sod.

If the pioneer selected a claim of timber land, as the earliest settlers invariably did, he forthwith began the construction of a log cabin. Most of the work he did himself, though perhaps the neighbors were called over for a "house raising" when the logs had been cut and dragged to the site. The walls were of selected logs, formed straight and true by nature, cut to a length measured off not with a carpenter's rule but by a notch cut in the handle of the ax. Having been hewn on two sides, the logs were then "saddled," "notched," and fitted at each end, with the ax in skillful hands. The walls, when built sufficiently high, were surmounted with a roof made of clapboards "rived off" from the butt-end of a tree that had been selected because of its straight grain that permitted broad, thin pieces of boards to be thus obtained. These clapboards, laid to overlap, were held in place by poles laid across at proper intervals. The logs of which the walls were constructed were so

skillfully fitted that only small spaces were left between and these were filled or "daubed" with clay, often mixed with straw or rushes to hold it together.

Doors were formed of large clapboards riven in the same manner as those for the roof and spiked with wooden pins to a dove-tailed frame, and then the whole was hung to the jambs by thongs of deer hide or by wooden hinges. The door was fastened shut by a wooden latch which could be raised from the outside by pulling a leather string. For security at night the latch string was drawn in, but for friends and neighbors and even strangers, the "latch string was always hanging out" as a token of friendship and hospitality.

The large open fireplace occupied one end of the cabin. This fireplace and chimney was constructed with smaller logs framed together in the same manner as the walls were made and lined inside for a fire-box with large flat stones set upright, while the chimney was plastered inside and out with clay.

Thus shelter and warmth was provided, with fire for cooking as well. As soon as possible the floor of earth was covered with puncheons, hewn flat and smooth on one side, then set into the earth floor, and skillfully joined with the ax. A puncheon table was pinned to the logs on one side near the fireplace. In a corner of the cabin a large one-legged bed was built. The chairs, or rather stools, were homemade and had but three legs.

A fourth leg was unnecessary, for only three could touch the uneven surface of the puncheon floor at one time.

An improvised three-sided barn or shed was erected for the protection of livestock. This was constructed by driving two rows of posts into the ground, stuffing hay between them, and likewise covering the roof with hay. At first cattle, horses, and swine ran at large so that fences had to be built to keep the stock out instead of in. These early rail fences were not straight but zig-zag, constructed of rails ten or twelve feet long and laid with ends overlapping. At every intersection stakes were driven obliquely into the ground, the upper ends crossing near the top of the fence. In the forks formed by the supporting stakes, the top rails or "riders" were laid. These stake and rider fences were said to be "hog tight, horse high, and bull strong."

In the yard surrounding the pioneer cabin a few rude implements — perhaps a plow, a heavy wagon, a grain cradle, an ox yoke, and a grindstone — might have been seen. Yonder picturesque well sweep and watering trough might indicate also the presence of an old oaken bucket.

J. A. SWISHER