

Around the Fireplace

“Here they built their cabin” sounds like the climax of the story, but the pioneer housewife knew that building the cabin was only the beginning of the home-making: there were three meals to be prepared every day, clothing to make, tiny babies to care for, sick people to be nursed.

These pioneer homes, of course, were not all alike. In the towns living conditions very soon became much the same as in the East, but the wife of the settler on an isolated farm had a more difficult problem. Even these homes show two general types — the log cabin of the timbered region and the frame or sod shanty of the prairie.

If the cabin had a fireplace, bread was baked in a Dutch oven or “bake pan” by heaping coals around and on top of the utensil. Corn bread or “dodger”, made of coarse corn meal often without soda, might be baked in a covered skillet over the coals or laid upon a “johnny-cake board” tilted toward the fire. Meat and “flapjacks” were sometimes fried in a long-handled skillet held over the fire, though a turkey, quarter of venison, or a large piece of pork could be cooked by hanging it before the fire on a twisted string. As the string unwound the meat turned slowly and browned evenly while the fat fell into a pan placed on the hearth below — the “drip-

ping pan" of the modern housewife. Upsetting this pan meant getting the "fat in the fire".

In the prairie homes of a later period stoves were used instead of fireplaces, for wood and coal were luxuries. Often the prairie housewife had to burn hay, twisted into a long roll, for cooking or heating. Even ears of corn were thrown into the stove if a roaring hot fire was needed.

"What shall we have for dinner?" was sometimes no rhetorical question for the pioneer mother. Usually there were corn dodgers, fried pork, and coffee. Wild turkey, venison, and fish offered variety and in the summer there were corn, potatoes, and other vegetables from the garden as well as wild plums, crab-apples, and grapes from the thickets. The lack of cellars, however, made it difficult to keep these things over winter on account of the sub-zero weather. Vegetables were sometimes buried in pits outside or under the floor of the cabin. Fruits might be dried and thus kept. Wild honey or sorghum molasses took the place of candy and sugar. Corn was shelled, subjected to a bath in wood ash lye, hulled, washed, and thus converted into hominy. Mustard greens, horse radish, and other edible herbs could be found in season.

Keeping the house clean was a task for Hercules. The floor was sometimes of packed dirt, sometimes of puncheon slabs laid flat side up, sometimes of rough boards. Dry hay might be used to cover the dirt floors, but there were no carpets. Fortunately,

perhaps, there was not much furniture to dust. A packing-box table or one of boards, a bed or two, a few home-made or splint-bottomed chairs, a cupboard made of rough lumber, and a flour barrel made up the chief articles of the household. X

The difficulties of the housekeeper were, of course, immensely increased by the number of activities which had to be carried on in the house. It must have been a steamy, odorous atmosphere. Cooking, eating, sleeping, washing, nursing the sick, and laying out the dead — every task had to be performed in the one room, at least in cold weather. Wet clothing of the men folks was hung before the fire, jostling the coffee pot or the “bake oven”. Game was frequently brought indoors to be dressed.

When a pioneer woman wanted soap she had to make it. This process involved three separate tasks — leaching ashes to secure lye, collecting the tallow or grease from the meat, and boiling the two substances together in such a proportion as to produce a substance called soft soap. There were no bath tubs and the streams were a cold substitute during the winter. Possibly the small boys of the family found this no hardship. Morning ablutions were performed by washing face and hands in the family wash basin or in a large gourd. A tooth brush would have been looked upon with derision. Small children, especially those with curly hair, must have suffered from the “reddin” or fine tooth comb. (This, it may be said, was not used chiefly for looks.) X

Other sources of irritation to the housewife of early Iowa were the flies, mice, rats, and bedbugs. There were no screens and the flies migrated at will from the stable to the house. If shooed away from the victuals, they settled on the strings of dried apples or pumpkin or the smoked meat hanging from the rafters. Mice and rats persistently invaded the flour barrel and the "meal chist", feasted on the candles, and committed suicide in the milk pans.

Ready made dresses, shirts, and overalls were unknown to the early Iowa pioneers. Indeed, many women on the frontier had to hackle flax and card wool, spin yarn, weave the woolen, linen, or linsey-woolsey cloth, and then sew the garments by hand, for sewing machines, too, were unknown. The spinning wheel occupied the place of honor in many a cabin. In the evenings there were stockings to knit, or perhaps hats were plaited from straw gathered from the fields. Mittens might be made of skins or knit from homespun yarn. Cotton goods might be purchased by the bolt and dyed at home for gowns, bonnets for the women, and shirts for the men. In the summer women wore slat sunbonnets and in the winter knitted hoods. The fashions even then were not always sensible or appropriate. Surely the hoop skirt was a handicap in such activities as soap-making or cooking over an open fire.

If any of these tasks were performed after sunset the housewife had to work by the light of a tallow dip, made by dipping a wick in cooling tallow again

and again until it was large enough for a candle, or perhaps a molded tallow candle was used.

And when at the close of the day the family prepared for bed, it was very likely a home made, one-legged pole bed on which the adults slept. The log walls furnished support for the three other corners. Across these rails slats or a weaving of heavy cord was used to support the tick stuffed with hay or straw, and in the winter surmounted by a feather bed. A smaller and movable trundle bed for the children could be pushed under this stationary bed in the day time. A half log, hollowed out in the center, made a cradle for the baby, and it was seldom empty.

The pioneers were a hardy lot and their active life, fresh air, and coarse food saved them from many ailments. They were not, however, immune from disease, and accidents were common. Doctors were scarce, frequently untrained, and many times could not reach a patient because of bad roads. A neighbor woman usually attended the advent of an infant but the mother herself treated most of the ailments of her family. Many of their remedies, consisting of bitters or tea made from herbs such as burdock, plantain, pennyroyal, sassafras, boneset, camomile, or gentian roots, were probably harmless if not efficacious. It would not be surprising if at times a patient received the wrong dose, but the hot tea or poultice often gave relief.

Ague and itch were common and persistent mala-

dies on the frontier. For the latter affliction the mother applied a lotion from the roots of the skunk-cabbage and firmly administered the honored remedy — sulphur and molasses. This remedy was also used in the spring as a tonic, receiving the credit which probably belonged to the spring sunshine and the more varied diet of vegetables, milk, and eggs which came with the warm weather.

Other remedies were mere superstitions handed down from primitive times. A "fetta bag" — a piece of asafetida tied up in a cloth — was sometimes tied around a child's neck to prevent its "ketchin" disease. Blood stones, snake stones, and mad stones served as a cure for nosebleed, snake bite, or the bite of a mad dog. Whisky, however, was the chief reliance for snake bite — and for many other things.

The various census reports classify these pioneer women as "not gainfully employed", and legal fiction represented them as "supported" by their husbands, but their economic and social contribution to the community life indicate that they earned if they were not paid. Cooking, spinning, weaving, sewing, milking, churning, making cheese, raising chickens, collecting herbs, nursing the sick, and rearing many children well — surely the pioneer mother earned her living and left the country richer for her work.

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