

Earning a Living

Some of the first venturesome white men who came to Iowa were seeking fortunes of fame or more substantial riches — the explorers, the missionaries, and the fur traders. They were trail-makers. But the men and women who came to make their homes in the new land were the true pioneers. Though they dared to risk their lives and all they had, they were not adventurers at heart looking for easy wealth. All they wanted was a living, hard earned withal; and their fondest hopes were to own a home, be free from debt, and rear their children in industry and thrift.

Most of the Iowa pioneers were farmers by necessity: they came of agricultural stock, born and bred to the soil, and the broad acres of Iowa afforded the most available means of earning a living. Artisans, merchants, lawyers, and doctors followed the settlement of the country. But whether a man worked at his trade, practised his profession, or delved into the earth the primary object of all was a living, and very few succeeded much beyond the necessities of food, shelter, and clothing.

To the pioneers themselves life was full of toil and hardship, alleviated somewhat by religious zeal and the open-hearted social democracy of the frontier. Thankful for the rude essentials, these hardy,

practical men and women spent precious little time in dreaming of romance or of empire. Probably only a few had eyes to see the beauty of nature about them. Hard work was their common experience and expectation. Early Iowans brought with them and established here a tradition of universal employment. Leisure was almost unknown and idleness was a sin. Ill health might temporarily excuse a person from work, but only the confirmed invalid, the idiot, and the old folks who had done their full share were exempt from labor. The children toiled like the others, helping with the multitudinous duties of housekeeping, caring for the younger children, working in the garden, doing the chores, herding the cattle, or performing a man's work in the field. The rigorous times required that every one should support himself. There was no charity for the lazy or incompetent. A neighbor who did not "change work" on even terms at house raisings, in the field, or at threshing time was likely to find it necessary to move on. Pioneer society was intolerant of any man who did not earn a living.

As soon as the frost was out of the ground in the spring the men were in the field, breaking the tough prairie sod for corn or sowing oats and wheat on the land that had previously succumbed to ax and plow. A low murmur of protest seemed to rise from the prairie as the sharp blade of the heavy plow ripped through its fibrous roots, while behind the plodding oxen rolled a long, smooth, black, yard-wide ribbon

of turf. The wedding of the virgin sod and the breaking plow was full of promise and pathos. Then back and forth across the black loam paced the sower of small grain with a two-bushel bag slung from his shoulder and his right arm swinging out and back in perfect rhythm with his stride as the seed was scattered evenly. Corn was laboriously planted in gashes cut with an ax in the newly broken sod. By June the prairie grass was ready for mowing. After that came the harvest of small grain with scythe and cradle. In the absence of threshing machines strong men wielded the flail and the winds of heaven winnowed the grain from the chaff even as in Bible times. During the calm days of Indian summer the corn was husked and grain was hauled to the distant grist-mill to be ground into meal and flour, while early in December when cold weather began in earnest the pigs were butchered and hams and bacon were salted down or smoked for future use. The winter months were occupied with splitting rails, chopping wood, making furniture and implements, mending harness, shelling seed corn, tending to the live stock, and keeping warm.

Be it observed that in the business of earning a living the Iowa pioneer had to construct his own roads, build his own house, manufacture his own furniture, make his own tools, produce his own food, prepare his own meat, obtain his own fuel, and raise his own flax and wool for clothing — all without money or credit or government aid. He was essen-

tially self-sustaining. What the farmer did not raise or make himself he obtained by barter. Wheat was traded for flour at the grist-mill and the miller took his pay in grain. By-products like hides bought shoes and clothing. Butter and eggs were exchanged at the general store for tea and calico. The doctor, lawyer, and editor accepted cord wood for their services. Rent was a share of the produce. Only the government demanded cash—and land was cheap and taxes low.

Measured in terms of money the pioneer had no need to worry about the cost of living. His house was humble, he worked hard for what he ate and wore, and perchance at the end of his life he had little money in the bank, but he did establish a home and earn a hearty living. Considering his resourcefulness, his industry, and his achievements, the pioneer was poorly paid. But a society in which every one worked though few became wealthy, where all were poor yet none were paupers could not fail to create an economic surplus. The children and grandchildren of the early settlers reap the rewards of pioneer labor. Although they came only to find a home and earn a meager living, the Iowa pioneers also founded a Commonwealth rich in the traditions and institutions they established.

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