

The Menace of the Blue-stem

A century ago the Iowa song would not have been in praise of corn. Beyond the wooded valleys, where the rolling prairie extended for miles and miles without a sign of human habitation, the queen of the landscape was the luxuriant blue-stem grass. When the first settlers came, pushing their way westward over the trackless sod, the undulating sea of blue-stem grass, as high as a horse's back, stretched away to the horizon. It was, indeed, a subject for enthusiastic acclaim, as it waved in regal splendor through the summer months. Ripened by the August sun and withered by the autumn frost, the dry grass was crushed to earth by the winter snow, but in the spring it sprang up again from roots strongly imbedded in the rich soil.

In 1854 W. J. Silvers, A. J. Barr, and two other land seekers on their way from Illinois to Kansas stopped at Mitchellville and, impressed by the vast expanse of rich farming land, decided to alter their plans and see Iowa first. Taking a northwesterly course, they came to the site of Nevada, occupied by only one log house at that time. There they traded a wild turkey they had caught

for a loaf of bread. Going on, to the present location of Story City, they found not even a cabin, but encountered an old trapper who said there was good land over on the Boone River.

Accordingly, they started across the big prairie in the southern part of Hamilton County. There was no road. Some traveler or hunter had gone that way previously and tied rags to tall stalks of gum weed. These were the only marks along the trail. They crossed the Boone River at a ford near the site of what was later known as Bone's mill.

"Coming out upon the prairie west of the timber," Mr. Silvers reminisced in J. W. Lee's *History of Hamilton County*, "we saw a sight never to be forgotten — the land covered with a luxuriant growth of grass, known as the blue-stem. It grew tall as a man could reach. I said to the boys, 'This is good enough for me, I guess I won't go any farther'. We could have our pick of the land as it all belonged to Uncle Sam and he only wanted \$1.25 per acre."

Having acquired a quarter section, Mr. Silvers returned to Illinois to fetch his family. Conveyed in a heavy wagon drawn by six yoke of oxen, they did not arrive until October and, consequently, the hastily constructed log cabin could not be thoroughly weather-proofed. Adequate protection from the severe cold was impossible. Both

Mr. and Mrs. Silvers froze their feet, while inside the cabin, that winter. Cold and other hardships, however, were the expected lot of the pioneer.

Distressing as were many of the circumstances of early settlement, nothing was more frightful than prairie fires. Pestilence, drought, floods, cyclones, blizzards, grasshoppers, and Indians were dreaded, but the flames that swept through the dry grass devastated fields, burned homes, and left families more helpless than any other calamity. Mr. Silvers did not escape this terrible experience. "I had all my fence burned twice by prairie fires," he remembered, "and barely saved my house and stable by hard work."

J. L. E. Peck, a pioneer lawyer of Primghar who began practice there in 1877, grew up on the prairies of Iowa. His observations on conditions during the settlement of the northwest part of the State carry the weight of excellent authority. In regard to prairie fires and their dire results, he wrote in his history of O'Brien County: "The yearly burning of the heavy annual growth of grass on the prairie, which had occurred from time immemorial, either from natural cause or from being set by human hands, was continued after the white settlers came in, and was a source of much annoyance, apprehension and, frequently, of severe loss. From the time the grass would burn,

which was soon after the first frost, usually about the first of October, till the surrounding prairie was all burned over, or if not all burnt, till green grass in the spring had grown sufficiently to prevent the rapid progress of the fire, the settlers were continually on the watch, and, as they usually expressed the idea, 'sleeping with one eye open'. When the ground was covered with snow, or during rainy weather, the apprehension was quieted and both eyes could be closed with safety."

The settlers resorted to various means of protection against the menace of the prairie blue-stem. A common practice was to plow several furrows on each side of a strip of prairie sod around buildings or fields and then burn the grass in the furrow-bounded zone. Sometimes, however, the prairie did not burn in the fall and spring fires were likely to cross the protective strip unless it was freshly burned. If conditions were favorable, therefore, settlers sometimes fired the prairie beyond the outer furrows and reserved the protective strip for the following summer when both old and new grass would burn.

Another method of safeguarding premises was to backfire by lighting the grass near the buildings, stamping out the blaze as it approached, and controlling the outward spread as the flames

moved slowly against the wind. This was the best defense in the path of a prairie fire, sending a small blaze to meet the general conflagration, but it was a dangerous thing to do when the prairie was not already on fire.

All these precautions took time and labor. The early settler was busy beyond all conception of a generation used to automatic machinery and the conveniences of an established community. There was usually no time for doing what would now seem to be a task as easy as it was desirable. Moreover, protective measures were sometimes futile. "A prairie fire, driven by a high wind, would often leap all barriers and seem to put human efforts at defiance. When a fire had passed through a prairie, leaving the long lines of side fires, like two armies facing each other, the sight at night was grand; if one's premises were securely protected, he could enjoy such a fine exhibition hugely, but if the property was exposed, the sublimity of the scene was lost in the apprehension of danger."

The menace of prairie fires was so generally recognized that the State legislature provided in the *Code of 1851* that any person who "wilfully or without using proper caution set fire to" the prairie and thereby injured or destroyed the property of another person might be fined \$500, im-

prisoned in jail a year, or both. In 1862 a penalty of \$100 fine or thirty days in jail was prescribed for any one convicted of setting fire to the prairie and "allowing such fire to escape from his control, between the first day of September in any year, and the first day of May following". Men did not like to prosecute their neighbors, however, and the penalties were seldom inflicted, though fires were often set and frequently got out of control. Not dangerous to buildings on the windward side, because a fire moving against the wind could easily be extinguished, a grass fire was a serious hazard to neighbors on the leeward side.

An illustration of this danger occurred near Hook's Point (now Stratford) in 1871. A man was burning some stubble. Possibly through neglect, the fire got beyond his control and swept toward the north and east. The Patrick McPhillips home in Independence Township, some five and one-half miles east of Webster City, lay directly in the path of the fire. Mr. McPhillips was sick with ague and could do nothing to avert the destruction of his small house and perhaps the death of himself and family. Night was approaching and all seemed lost. At this juncture, however, a neighbor who was outside the track of the fire rushed to the rescue with a team and breaking plow. Quickly a furrow was made around the

house and grain stacks. About twenty-five feet from this he plowed a double furrow, and then burned the grass between. This proved to be an effective barrier against the flames. The cattle and horses were hastily driven out, took to their heels, and successfully outran the flames. The hay-covered barn burned, however, and two hogs perished in it. The flames illuminated the place as light as day. Oddly enough, this conflagration occurred on the same night that Mrs. O'Leary's cow kicked over the lantern and started the Chicago fire.

Helen Welch (later Mrs. J. N. Garth) wrote a description of this disastrous fire in Hamilton County to her cousin in Massachusetts. Her letter is characteristic of a young woman, reared in the East, who came to Iowa in the early days with all the youthful enthusiasm and courage of the founders of the prairie Commonwealth.

The Welch family bought land in Cass Township, Hamilton County, in 1869. Helen Welch lived in this community until the time of her death in 1892. "On the first night of the Chicago fire," she wrote to her cousin, "there was here the most horrid prairie fire that I ever witnessed. We expected to be burnt out, as it was a very windy night. About dusk we noticed a terrible prairie fire sweeping across the prairie, but thought it

might run farther east than it did. We saw it was coming near the home of a widow that lives three-quarters of a mile east of us, and the men all went to try to protect her buildings. They succeeded in doing so, with great work.

"One part of the fire started up about a mile south of her house, and went by her house like a streak of lightning, faster than a horse could run. She had a pile of potatoes and the fire baked part of them, half way through."

There was still danger that the fire might spread westward. The men began mowing, raking, and burning the grass around the Welch homestead, but about one o'clock in the morning a shower extinguished the flames.

"This fire started twenty-two miles away," reported Miss Welch, "and it burned out a great many people's stables and grain stacks. One man, seeing it coming, took all his furniture out of the house, and put it where he thought it would be safer than in the house, and it all burned up while the house was saved."

"Imagine the feelings of a man", wrote J. L. E. Peck, "who, alone in a strange land, after building a very modest homestead shanty" and harvesting his crops, "has his premises surrounded by a sea of standing grass, dry as tinder, stretching away for miles in every direction, over which the wild

prairie wind howls a dismal requiem, and knowing that a spark or match applied in all that distance will send a sea of fire wherever the wind may waft it". The settler would also be "conscious of the fact that there are men who would embrace the first opportunity to set fire from outside their own fields, regardless of whom it might consume," if their own property would be protected.

Single prairie fires have been known to burn over a quarter of a county and spread to adjoining land. The next day the whole area "would look like one drapery of death in mock funeral destruction, with the black ashes or dust moving in the heavens in streamers of black smoke". It was a spectacle never to be seen after the prairie blue-stem was gone.

"Conceive of grass from eight inches to five feet high," wrote Mr. Peck, "then apply the principle that heat rises and creates its own wind even on a still day; then add to that a high wind; then picture what havoc fire can do; then add the haystacks, bursting in air, which gave proof through the night that those stacks were still there; then get the conception of the fact that many prairies stretched for thirty or more unimpeded miles, and that a high wind would carry this seething, roaring, consuming fire and mass of flames often ten to fifteen feet high, with dense smoke and cinders

flying all over and high in the air, all piling flame after flame, and actually going as fast as a horse can run." In tall slough grass the fire sounded "like the rumbling of distant thunder" and lighted the sky on a dark night "like the Aurora Borealis".

Haystacks were particularly vulnerable and, once ablaze, facilitated the spread of the fire. Homesteaders and hay companies cut the blue-stem grass and cured hundreds of tons of wild hay. The stacks were scattered over the unoccupied prairie, partly for convenience and partly for protection against fire. It was safer to leave the hay out on the prairie, each stack protected by a circle of plowed ground, than to bring it all into the barnyard. When a haystack caught on fire, bunches of blazing grass would be carried high into the air and sail away to start new fires wherever the burning embers fell.

Loss of property was not the worst feature of the most dreaded calamity that overtook the early settlers. The danger of persons being caught with no means of escape was a constant threat. The pages of pioneer history are full of such tragedies.

On October 1, 1859, Robert and Margaret Caraway, with their baby, were returning to their farm home northeast of Alden in Hardin County, after a visit to the neighbors. Suddenly they no-

ticed a prairie fire coming toward them, driven by a strong wind. Though they ran for safety, Mrs. Caraway's clothing caught on fire and she was badly burned. After weeks of suffering she recovered, but the fire left deep scars. Her face was seamed and her fingers drawn and twisted. Mrs. Veda Caraway Long of Webster City, granddaughter of the injured woman, never forgot the scars on her grandmother's face.

The Schweringen family, consisting of father, mother, and three children, left their Ohio home in 1860 to locate on a claim north of Duncombe in Webster County. They left Nevada one beautiful Indian-summer morning in October, hoping to reach their new home the next day. They drove along happily, apparently oblivious of distant smoke in the air, or mistaking it for autumnal haze. They reached the southwest corner of section ten in Milford Township, Story County, and were traveling through a ravine when a raging prairie fire leaped through the tall dry grass and enveloped the wagon. The family made futile efforts to escape, but heat and suffocation overcame them, and the mother and two children perished there by the wagon. One child must have crept away, for its skull was found on the prairie the next spring. Mr. Schweringen, suffering fearfully from burns, managed to crawl to a house over a mile away,

where he was tenderly cared for. His burns were so serious, however, that he died the next day. On May 29, 1938, a bronze marker was placed, with appropriate ceremonies, at the grave of the Schweringens, whose remains were buried in the Sheffield Cemetery, some five miles southeast of Story City. In a broader sense this particular monument is a memorial to the courage and hardship of the pioneers who risked their lives in taming the wilderness of grass. Many were the sacrifices to the inflammability of the luxuriant blue-stem.

BESSIE L. LYON