

The Trials of a Homesteader

At the close of the Civil War, after three years' service, I was discharged. In September, 1862, just before enlisting in the army, I had married Harriet Z. Currier of Nashua, New Hampshire. After my discharge from the army we resided in Nashua for about one year. While there I worked in a machine shop and received as wages seventy-five cents a day. In six months my pay was increased to \$1.25 a day, but I realized that it would be impossible to provide a comfortable home for a family on so small a wage. Determining to take Horace Greeley's advice, I went to Rockford, Illinois, where I found work in a soap factory for fifty dollars a month.

Although I had never been a farmer, I was ambitious to be the owner of a farm, and I soon determined to go farther west in search of a government homestead. With this end in view I purchased a team of horses, and in the spring of 1866 my wife and I, in a covered emigrant wagon, started west. I had no knowledge of the country west of Illinois, and no definite idea where to locate. After three

[This account of the experiences of an Iowa homesteader on the Des Moines River Improvement lands is adapted for THE PALIMPSEST from Charles H. Morrill's *The Morrills and Reminiscences*. The book was written when Mr. Morrill was seventy-five years old, after he had spent a lifetime developing more than a hundred thousand acres of raw land on the frontier in Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana.—THE EDITOR]

days' travel we reached Savanna on the Mississippi River. There was no bridge and everyone had to cross in a ferry-boat. As we were waiting for the boat I made the acquaintance of Mr. J. P. Smith and his wife. Mr. Smith was a Yankee from New Hampshire, who had been in the West several years and was also seeking a western home on government land. He had some knowledge of central Iowa, as he had looked the region over the year before, and had decided to locate near Webster City. I gladly accepted his invitation to join his party. We made the journey by easy stages. Neither family had children. The trip was one of the most enjoyable of my life.

After about three weeks we arrived at Webster City. There we learned that government land could probably be had about fifteen miles south. We then went to a small settlement, known as Hook's Point, located a mile north of the present town of Stratford and half-way between Webster City and Boone. The land on which I located was a portion of what was known as the Des Moines River Improvement land grant.

After much controversy and litigation the United States Supreme Court decided that the patents issued to settlers who had preëmpted land in this grant were void, inasmuch as the entire grant had been conveyed to the Des Moines River Navigation and Railroad Company. The settlers, feeling that they were being fraudulently deprived of their prop-

erty, organized and refused either to vacate or purchase the lands from the Navigation Company. As the decisions of the courts were in favor of the Navigation Company, Federal marshals were directed to eject settlers. When the settlers armed themselves and refused to leave their homes a reign of terror began. Both sides went prepared to defend themselves. Several agents of the Navigation Company were shot by the settlers; marshals were attacked; many families of the settlers, numbering about two thousand, were ejected from their homes; and some men were imprisoned for violating the orders of the court. The Navigation Company, through its agents, continued to harass the settlers by serving notices on them that they must vacate the premises or purchase the land from the company.

Owing to these conditions, permanent improvements were neglected and most of the settlers lived in mere shacks. Many bills were introduced in Congress to reimburse the settlers for money paid by them to the government. In 1872 there were two hundred and forty suits pending against settlers for rent and damages. A commission was appointed by the Governor of Iowa to ascertain the value of the improvements on the land, which was found to be one million five hundred thousand dollars. For more than twenty years the rights of settlers who had lost their land were ignored. Not until 1894 did Congress pass an act to return to them the money paid into the United States Land Offices as purchase

price under the preëmption act. In the meantime, many of the settlers, driven from their homes, had died or gone to other territory to secure new homes.

It was during this contention that I settled on an eighty-acre tract of the Des Moines River land grant. During the first summer we lived in a small shack having one room. The roof was constructed of elm boards, badly warped and cracked by the hot sun. Whenever it rained most of the water came through, wetting the bedding and everything inside the so-called house. We had at that time about five hundred dollars, a team of horses, and a wagon. Our money was soon expended in the purchase of two cows, a few pigs, and enough lumber for a small house.

As I had always lived in Concord, New Hampshire, I knew nothing about farming, and my wife was a city bred girl. Everything we tried to do seemed a failure. I knew nothing about the care or management of horses and cattle. My wife knew just as little about farmhouse work, such as making butter or caring for chickens. We had practically no comforts in the house, and no cellar — only a hole in the ground with dirt walls, a very inviting place for rats and mice. I spent the first summer breaking prairie for some of my neighbors, and a few acres for myself. We had no tillable land, and therefore no crop. Our new house was twenty-eight by twenty-five feet, one story high, and divided into four small rooms. It was so poorly built that during the first winter Mrs. Morrill, while at work in the kitchen, froze her

feet so badly that she suffered for several years. A pail of water standing in the kitchen over night sometimes froze solid.

During the first year our daughter Lilla was born. In the fall of 1866, my health was very poor. I had a violent cough and showed symptoms of tuberculosis. In September, in company with J. P. Smith, I went to Boone, sixteen miles south, and was examined by a lung specialist. He said I had consumption and advised me, if I had friends in the East, to go to them as I was in a very serious condition. When the cold weather came on I began to improve and decided to remain in Iowa.

In the spring of 1867 I planted about forty acres. The season was wet, I did a poor job of farming, and my crop was almost a total failure. One of my horses died, leaving me without a team. I purchased a blind horse on credit, and in 1868 put in about sixty acres. This year also was very wet and crops again failed. Gradually I was getting into debt. This indebtedness was almost always for food and clothing. I was indebted to my neighbors for corn, wheat, and meat and it was impossible for me to pay them. Naturally my credit became poorer as time went on, and I was soon considered, by those living near me, as financially irresponsible and not worthy of credit. In 1868 our son, Charles Albert, was born.

In 1869 there was another partial crop failure due to wet weather. For the first time I was refused credit at the store at Hook's Point, our nearest town,

for twenty-five cents worth of coffee, and I was informed that I was on the blacklist because I did not pay my debts. To me this was a terrible blow; winter was coming on and we were almost without shoes and clothing. Thinking I might obtain credit in towns farther away, where I was not as well known, I went to Boone, Webster City, and Mineral Ridge. Wherever I went my name was found in the blacklist book, and I was refused credit. I purchased from my neighbors, on credit, old saddle skirts with which I half-soled shoes for myself and wife. For over two years we had no clothing except that which we made for ourselves from brown denim. My wife even made mittens and caps for me from old worn clothing. For nearly two years we had no wheat flour because I had to have cash to obtain it. But I was able to purchase, on credit, a few bushels of corn from distant neighbors who did not know my financial standing, and could get it ground at a mill near by.

While I was in this desperate condition, I lost another horse which hung itself in the stable. After several weeks' search I found a poor "crow-bait" that I could purchase on time by agreeing to pay twice the real value of the animal. In 1870 our condition was most deplorable. During the summer I found a tract of one hundred and twenty acres of land that I could purchase for two hundred dollars by paying one hundred dollars down and the balance in two years. I succeeded in borrowing one hundred

dollars from my uncle, John Henry Morrill of Rockford, Illinois. The season started with fine prospects for crops, and during the latter part of the summer I disposed of my newly acquired land for nine hundred dollars. When I had paid my debts I still had five hundred dollars.

After several days of discussion, my wife and I decided to invest the entire sum of five hundred dollars in young calves, which at weaning time could be purchased at five dollars a head. To do this we would have to continue living on very little, and deprive ourselves of every comfort. We were young and full of hope, however, and we concluded that by making this sacrifice we would soon be on the road to prosperity. At that time my only ambition was to acquire a comfortable home. All around our farm were large tracts of land owned by non-residents. This land was free to settlers for pasturage and for cutting hay. By the time frost came in the fall of 1870 I had more than one hundred head of calves, and sufficient hay to feed them through the winter. I was so afraid some of these young cattle might die that I almost slept with them. My crops in 1870 were very good, and with my debts paid, and my young cattle growing, I felt myself on the highroad to success.

I remember well the day I rode from neighbor to neighbor to pay my debts. Nearly every man thanked me and said, "Morrill, we are glad you are making good. We never expected you to be able to

pay us." This was one of the happiest days of my life. My debts were all paid and my honor as a man was redeemed. After that I was able to look my neighbors in the face without feeling that they had good reason to think I had obtained credit from them under false pretenses. By the year 1871 I had a fine herd of cattle, and my credit was established so that when necessary I could borrow small sums of money from the banks. In 1872 I sold a bunch of fat cattle for one thousand dollars.

The experience I had in Iowa was just the lesson I needed to make me a careful, successful man. It taught me methods of economy and thrift, the value of money, and more than all, the value of credit, which in a very large degree means character and honor. In the fall of 1871 I made a trip to Nebraska where I purchased from the Union Pacific Railroad one hundred and sixty acres of land in Polk County on the Big Blue River. The next spring I drove six yoke of oxen overland, took a homestead on land adjoining that which I had purchased the previous year, and during the summer I broke one hundred acres of prairie. My intention was to move my family west the following spring. During the summer of 1872, while I was in Nebraska, our son Arthur was born. It was about March 1, 1873, when I started to Nebraska with my wife and children in two covered wagons. We had at that time a hundred and twenty-five head of cattle and eight horses.

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