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A. J. Whisman, Pioneer

When A. J. Whisman came to Iowa the whole region between the Little Sioux River and Sioux City was a prairie wilderness. In the summer of 1867 he heard that a quarter section of western Iowa land, as good as any in Illinois, could be homesteaded and proved up for twenty-one dollars. Having sold his farm implements and household goods, twelve milch cows for fifteen dollars a head, and two hundred bushels of wheat at seventy-five cents a bushel, he fitted up a prairie schooner and set out with his wife and three children to establish a new home on the frontier.

The journey by covered wagon from Pontiac, Illinois, to the site of his future abode on the banks of the Little Sioux River in Cherokee County required twenty-six days. The Mississippi River was crossed at Muscatine on a ferry-boat which conveyed four teams and wagons at a time. He

crossed the Cedar River on Brown's Ferry in the southeast corner of Goshen Township in Muscatine County, found a bridge over the Iowa River at Iowa City, and forded the Des Moines River at Fort Dodge. There was a store, a stockade, and a blockhouse at Fort Dodge, but after leaving that "town" and reaching the top of the hills to the west Mr. Whisman stopped to view what looked to him like desolation with not a cornfield, house, or any other sign of habitation in sight.

Undaunted nevertheless, he continued his journey and soon encountered a new peril — that of crossing Devil's Slough near Twin Lakes. When nearing this "bugbear" to travellers he met a man who told him that his team of horses could not get the heavy wagon across the slough and offered to take them through with two yoke of small oxen for twenty dollars. Mr. Whisman replied, "If those four little oxen can make it, my horses can", and declined the offer. The slough covered many acres of utterly impassable ground with the exception of one strip about twenty feet wide where a sort of road-bed had been constructed by laying down quantities of tall grass, which grew so abundantly around the swamp. Having explored this track on horseback, Mr. Whisman found the road to be comparatively safe so he returned and brought his outfit and family safely through to the other side, although a slip from the road would have meant danger and perhaps tragedy.

Mr. Whisman selected for his homestead a quarter section of land on the west side of the Little Sioux River. There he built a small house and farm buildings at once. "We lived warm that first winter," says Mr. Whisman, "for our cabin was made of thick logs well chinked, the roof was covered with two feet of dirt, we had a fireplace and a cook stove, and were well protected from winter winds by a thick grove." It was so warm that green shoots grew three feet long from the logs inside the house. The dirt roof was very satisfactory during the winter but in the following May, after three days of rain, the mud began to trickle through. Thereupon several big cottonwood trees were cut down, the heavy bark was peeled off, and the squares of bark were laid like shingles over the mud and extended far out at the sides. After that there was no more trouble with a leaky roof.

When the time came that the Whismans needed and could afford a bigger and better house, a frame dwelling was decided upon. Mr. Whisman felled cottonwood and maple trees and hauled the logs one at a time to Pilot Rock, a distance of nearly ten miles, where there was a little "circular" saw. On each return trip he hauled the new-made lumber — a tedious process we would call it now.

Before leaving for Iowa, Mr. Whisman had written to his brother-in-law, M. H. Pierson, to buy some corn and put up some hay for him, but when he arrived there was no corn or hay awaiting him. Mrs.

Pierson had a three gallon jar of butter that she was going to market in Sioux City but she sold it to Mr. Whisman instead. Flour and other provisions for winter were necessary and not to be bought in Cherokee County. Denison, the nearest railway station, was sixty miles away, so that a trip there and back required four days. Corn could also be obtained at the little Mormon settlement of Deloit and flour at Castana.

Late in the fall Mr. Whisman and Will Pierson started to Denison for corn and meat. They reached Ida Grove the first night and slept in their wagons. "In the middle of the night," says Mr. Whisman, "I was startled by a noise, then the horses began to snort and I thought sure the Indians were coming. I called to Will Pierson to listen for Indians, but we could soon tell that it was a large herd of elk passing with four or five men in pursuit. These men told us they had six elk in the wagons following and were trailing the herd so they would be tired the next day and easier to get a shot at."

When they arrived at Deloit the next day, which was Saturday, they found a man who had two hogs for sale. The owner of the hogs agreed to butcher on Sunday, to sell the dressed pork for ten cents a pound, and to keep the men and their teams until Monday free of charge. Accordingly, on Sunday morning the two fat hogs were butchered near the Mormon church. They cost Mr. Whisman seventy dollars.

On the return trip the weather turned cold, about four inches of snow fell, and the meat froze stiff. Mr. Whisman bought twenty bushels of corn at Cheadle's Grove and three bushels of potatoes at Ida Grove. Not having money to stay at Moorehead's tavern in Ida Grove, they built a big bonfire and camped for the night. During the evening a man and his wife on their way to Denison for provisions drove up and asked to share the camp fire. Mr. Whisman and Mr. Pierson were glad of the company. At Correctionville, where less than ten families were living about a stockade and blockhouse, several people wanted to buy some of the fresh pork, but Mr. Whisman told them he had a family at home almost starving and refused to sell a pound. With plenty of pork and venison his family fared very well that winter.

During the first winters in the new country, Mr. Whisman spent considerable time hunting and trapping. Game was abundant in the Little Sioux Valley, particularly deer, elk, grouse, and wild turkeys. There were thousands of buffalo over around Sioux City but none in the vicinity of his homestead. "I could watch great flocks of turkeys in the timber along the river," he says, "and on one hunt I killed eight, the largest weighing twenty-four pounds dressed. Sometimes I would be gone a week, hunting as far as Denison, and once I shot a two hundred and fifty pound deer just east of where Rodney now stands." On one hunt Mr. Whisman fell in with

O. B. Smith, for whom Smithland was named, and together they killed nine deer. They made "jerked venison" of the meat by hanging it on forked sticks over a bed of coals made by burning dead willow branches in a ditch. This meat kept indefinitely. Having been soaked awhile and then boiled in water and grease, it made good eating. Mr. Whisman spent his last twenty-five dollars, hard-earned and hard-to-part-with, for some traps said by their owner to be worth thirty-six dollars but which he was anxious to sell that he might get back to civilization. The traps proved to be a real bargain, for Mr. Whisman's first catch of beavers netted him twenty-five dollars. He also caught many mink, muskrats, and wolves, which enabled him to better provide for his family.

Those were the days of "flapjacks" and "lasses", grasshopper days, days of great hardships and appalling disasters. In August, 1868, Mr. Whisman was digging a well when he chanced to look up and saw grasshoppers flying in such numbers that it looked like a hard snow storm. He called to his helpers to pull him out so he could watch the flight. About four o'clock in the afternoon the grasshoppers began to light, and although they left the next morning about ten there was not an ear of corn nor a leaf left on a thirty acre piece of sod corn, a forty acre field of wheat was entirely ruined, and every head of oats was cut off. Even the watermelons and muskmelons were filled with holes. One

six-acre piece of corn in a clearing in the timber was missed by the hoppers so that Mr. Whisman had that left for winter feed. A peculiar thing was noted in grasshopper time — that they flew only when the wind blew from the northwest and settled as soon as the wind changed. In 1871 the grasshoppers came again by myriads but did not light in as great numbers as in 1868, because the wind happened to be to their liking for travelling. These pests were so destructive in 1873 that farmers in O'Brien County were forced to leave or starve. One O'Brien County man told Mr. Whisman that the hoppers ate all of his cabbage and then sat on the stumps and called, "More kraut, more kraut."

About a year after the Whismans came to Cherokee County, another settler and his wife homesteaded just north of their place. The woman soon became very ill and, being unable to get a doctor, she died. No coffin was to be had, nor material for one, and the new neighbor had no money if either had been available. Mr. Whisman had just purchased some walnut lumber at Oto and hauled it the thirty miles to build a cupboard for his wife, but when he heard of his neighbor's extremity he gladly gave him the lumber and helped build a rude box in which to bury the unfortunate woman. They had no nails so the boards were held together with hand-made wooden pins. There was no minister, no funeral, no singing — simply a burial in a new, lonely land. The only marker for the grave is a row of trees outlining its

shape, now nearly sixty years old, still standing in mute testimony of life and death in pioneer days.

In 1867 Mr. Whisman made application for a post-office to be located in his house, the mail being carried at that time by horseback or "buckboard" from Onawa to Peterson. His request was granted, and when asked by the government to name the post-office, he promptly answered, "Washta". The name was suggested by an incident that had occurred a few weeks before. While hunting with a fine rifle he met three Sioux Indians. All of the Indians were armed and when the largest asked to see his rifle Mr. Whisman complied with the request. The Indians examined the rifle with great care, exclaiming, "wasté, wasté"—which is the Sioux word meaning beautiful, fine, or good. The Indian pronunciation is wash-tā'.

Twenty years after "Uncle Jack" Whisman and his family settled on the Little Sioux River, the Illinois Central Railroad was built from Cherokee to Onawa, and the depot and town site of Washta was located across the river east of the Whisman homestead. Thereupon Mr. Whisman rented his farm and moved to Washta where he and his son kept store for a number of years. Later he moved back to the farm where he lived until 1909, when he sold the old homestead and bought a place in Washta where he still lives. Although he is eighty-seven years old, "Uncle Jack" Whisman, as he is familiarly called by all who know him well, cares for a

large garden and lawn, keeps a flock of chickens, goes fishing almost daily in the summer time, chops quantities of wood in the winter, and is a regular church attendant, never missing a morning service on account of the weather and very rarely on account of his health.

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