

## Buying a Farm in 1866

Almost every day throughout most of the years in his long life, Theophilus Kirkpatrick wrote something in his farm diary. It was usually only a line or two each day, pertaining to the humdrum affairs of rural life. The weather was under constant observation, help was hired in harvest time, fences were mended, a sick horse was doctored, the neighbors were visited, and the payment or collection of debts was carefully recorded. No effort was made to embellish the matter-of-fact account with explanations or personal opinions for the benefit of posterity. The diary was simply a journal of common transactions. As I turn the pages in these little note books, the bits of history that link them to the present have to do with his trip from Illinois in 1866 and the purchase of a farm in Iowa.

The Kirkpatrick homestead had been staked off near the Illinois River in 1836, before the government land office was opened in that neighborhood. For thirty years grandfather lived there. He had prospered to the extent of three hundred acres and a family of six children, and it was his ambition to give each of the boys and girls a quarter section of land out of which they were to make a home.

At the close of the Civil War several neighbors who had moved to southwestern Iowa sent back

reports of cheap land and good prospects within driving distance of the railroads which were being built or anticipated west of the Mississippi River. After harvest in 1866, a quarter section of the Illinois farm was sold for thirty-seven dollars and fifty cents an acre or a total of six thousand dollars. For land without buildings that was considered a high figure — the peak of the war boom.

On Wednesday, October 3rd, Mr. Kirkpatrick and his son-in-law, S. K. Leacox, set out for the ferry across the Mississippi at New Boston and arrived at Washington, Iowa, on Tuesday the ninth. They drove a light team hitched to a one-seated buckboard. Concealed in their clothes they carried two thousand dollars in paper money. The diary records an overnight stop at the deserted cabin of a wood chopper, the tedious drive over roads that were little more than ruts in the hard ground, and the elder man's fatigue. They did not realize then that hard, rough roads were preferable to bottomless mud. A year and a half later, while moving the household goods, the diary records the loss of several pieces of furniture left by the road side because the horses could scarcely move an empty wagon.

After a night spent with relatives at Washington, which was the terminal of a branch of the Rock Island Railroad, the team was led out of the barn to start for Creston, but the brown mare was lame. A delay of a day or more seemed necessary. That afternoon, while Mr. Kirkpatrick rode out south of

town, Mr. Leacox, in a casual conversation with a druggist, told of his errand and the search for "raw land". He said that he had originally intended to drive through to Pawnee, Nebraska, but his father-in-law preferred to stay east of the Missouri River because he feared the lack of rainfall on the plains. The druggist's father-in-law happened to be a land speculator and of course a deal was proposed on an "improved" farm in the timber near town. Mr. Leacox remained steadfast in his demand for land which could be obtained directly from the government, but finally agreed to go out the next day to look at an eight hundred acre tract twenty miles northwest of town. For several years there had been very little call for prairie land. This particular tract, which had cost five dollars per acre ten years before, was being offered at seven dollars and fifty cents per acre.

With a borrowed team they drove out to look at the farm. As Mr. Kirkpatrick wrote in his diary, "All went out to see prairie." They arrived in the vicinity of the tract without knowing for certain the section numbers or the names of the adjoining land-owners. Half a dozen farmsteads within sight had been inclosed but most of the country was open level prairie growing up in blue-stem with occasional patches of hazel brush. There were a few trees here and there by the little water courses where buffalo, and more recently cattle, had trampled the grass. Herds of cattle were grazed on the unfenced prairie

in summer and the boys who herded the cattle found plenty of time to snare ground squirrels, hunt bird nests, and gather great bouquets of the little orange-colored lilies which grew in clumps everywhere.

The Illinois landseekers were pleased with the appearance of the country. They thought that the creek would furnish plenty of water for cattle, and timber for stove wood and fencing material was only a dozen miles away. They expected to cultivate only a small homestead and judged that it would be possible to graze cattle on the unfenced prairie for another generation. That night after dark they drove to Washington for the deed showing the section numbers, and returned the following morning, calling at the home of Rev. D. V. Smock who lived a mile west of the present town of Keota. Mr. Smock served two parishes, each about eight miles on either side of him, and was also county superintendent of schools. With the aid of his wall map showing the school districts and section numbers the land was readily located and a search of only a few minutes revealed the little mounds which the surveyors had spaded up to mark the corners of each quarter section. All afternoon the men walked around the tract. Mr. Kirkpatrick agreed to take the five quarter sections at the price of six thousand dollars provided that Mr. Leacox would give up the search for "free land". On the way into town these personal affairs were arranged and the deal was closed.

The next season one of the Kirkpatrick boys and Mr. Leacox drove out from Illinois to break a piece of sod and rent a house in Washington for the family. By that time several new settlers were moving in and land values had advanced to ten dollars an acre. Mr. Kirkpatrick moved to Iowa in the spring of 1868. Four years later the rails of the Knoxville branch of the Rock Island Railroad were laid and a station was located within two and a half miles of his farm. In 1874 he purchased an adjoining hundred and sixty, one of the last of the unfenced quarter sections on the prairie, for eighteen dollars and ten cents an acre. The days of cheap land in southeastern Iowa were over.

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