

Prairie Homesteading

My father, Ludwick D. Turner, was a Union soldier in the Civil War. After that experience he wanted, above all else, to have a home and be at peace, and so presently he married Eliza J. Russell who had been teaching school. Hard times followed the war and my parents, like most young people of that day, desired to own a home. They had been reared in the rocky, timbered lands of northern New York and believed somewhere in the West was better land.

On March 1, 1868, my parents, with my father's sister, Mrs. Julia A. Johnson (whose husband had been killed in the war), and her three children, left Warrensburg, New York. Traveling by rail, stage, and ferry they eventually arrived in Jones County, Iowa. Near Monticello they were given the use of some land for which my father worked a few days each month in payment. There they spent the summer months, bought an ox-team and other cattle, and prepared to move farther west in search of cheap land.

With their supply of food, consisting largely of dry beans, dried corn, home-cured meats, and some dried wild fruits, they started in a covered

wagon for the prairie country. It was autumn and a very rainy season. My father walked beside the wagon driving the team of pure white oxen. Their names were Duke and Dardy. Aunt Julia and the two boys walked also to keep the ten head of cattle from straying. They were nearly four weeks reaching Fort Dodge from Monticello. I was the only one of the party neither footsore nor weary, for I was a babe a few weeks old. Mother and my cousin Lillias also rode in the wagon.

Arriving at Fort Dodge my aunt and father made entry for homesteads on section 6, Township 90, Range XXXIII, now the northwest section in Colfax Township, about forty miles beyond Fort Dodge. The original homestead of my parents has never changed hands. I hold the original patent bearing President Grant's signature. The homestead land in what is now Pocahontas County was not taken early in the swampy districts, because the settler desired land he could cultivate. Probably one-fifth of the land of the county was marshy. The principal sloughs were called Purgatory, Devil's Island, Muskrat, and Sixteen Mile sloughs. It was said a man became web-footed after living in the county a year. A traveler's only guide consisted of certain hills, streams, and rocks on the trails.

Many times I have heard my mother say, "Oh,

how beautiful was the Iowa prairie, free from tree stumps and rocks!" The upland prairie, carpeted with bluestem and buffalo grass, was dotted from early spring until late in the fall with several varieties of many-colored flowers.

A few, in the order of their coming, were the windflower or crocus, buttercup, violet, shoe-string, yellow puccoon, wild rose, tiger lily, sweet william, blue-cup, aster, and some I never heard named. The swamp lands and sloughs were noted for tall canes and grasses, tall enough to hide a man on horseback. The swamp flowers were later than the prairie flowers and waxy. The water lily or lotus in white, pink, and yellow colors grew single and double. As they floated among their palm-like green leaves they were a picture to behold. Their fragrance was very pleasing.

There was an abundance of wild game — prairie chickens, quail, plover, geese, ducks, rabbits, and an occasional deer, providing fresh meat the year around. The ponds and streams were full of fish. Of fruits there were wild strawberries in abundance, plums, wild grapes, elderberries, and wild crab apples that had a very pungent flavor — once eaten, never forgotten. A berry known as nightshade and cornfield berry, that grew soon after the breaking plow had turned the earth, made delicious preserves and pies. From

this the wizard Burbank propagated the wonder-berry which is much larger and similar in taste.

As a source of income the early settler trapped mink, muskrats, and other fur-bearing animals, though the prices were unusually low. I have heard my mother say that many settlers could not have remained had the animal life not been so abundant.

Many snakes and lizards lived on the prairie. Though most of them were harmless they were very much dreaded by women and children. They skimmed through the grass at a great speed, and got into the shallow wells. Often before we could use the water we had to dip the snakes and lizards out, and then wait till fresh water came in.

No one can describe the myriads of mosquitoes that infested the lowlands. Cattle and horses would go on a stampede at times to get away from them. At milking time smudges were built to keep them away so cows would stand still to be milked. Millions of lightning bugs, flitting about in the grass, made a pretty scene on summer nights.

The first task after locating a homestead was to build some kind of habitation. Timber was scarce on the prairie and so our first houses were dug-outs. In the fall of 1868 there was not a shack or a dugout in sight but the next year other settlers came two miles distant. We did not live long in

the dugout. It caught fire on the inside, from the hay which, twisted in hard knots resembling a figure eight, was used for fuel. We then went to my aunt's dugout to live until father could haul enough lumber from Fort Dodge to build a one-room frame house twelve by fourteen feet in dimensions. This humble cabin was our home for many years, owing to hardships and poverty, caused by grasshoppers, prairie fires, and blizzards.

The homesteaders who struggled to live on the Iowa prairie surely earned all they got. Some of the later settlers used to say, "You got your land for nothing." No words ever stirred so much resentment in the Scotch blood of my mother as that remark. Those who came after roads were built, sloughs drained, schools established, and towns developed had little comprehension of conditions experienced by the first settlers. Mere occupation and cultivation of the land was a high price to pay for it in terms of human labor and courage.

Section six in Colfax Township was so wet that only the highest places were broken at first. I recall the islands of rich black soil on the little hill-tops. In the first spring father chopped holes in the freshly turned sod and mother followed dropping the corn, beans, and rutabaga seed. We had

to raise most of our food supply. The dreaded prairie fire was a menace, especially in the fall when the grass was dry. When a fire started it rolled and leaped. Blazing tumbleweeds raced ahead nearly as fast as a horse could run.

The winters were unusually severe and not many of the settlers had warm houses. The "soddy" was usually warmer than the cabin. The cook stove served in many homes as the only means of heating. At first there was no grove protection and young trees were slow in growing. Sometimes the snow would drift higher than the buildings and cover the animal sheds.

The heavy snows in winter and bad roads caused settlers to live very meagerly at times especially when corn meal and buckwheat got low. Sometimes the coffee mill was used to grind corn meal for corn bread and mush. Parched field corn was ground and eaten also. But most settlers tried to provide sufficient food to last through the stormy winter weather. Our family was poor but we never went hungry, though we sometimes were very short of changes in diet. Nature was good to those who looked ahead and were not afraid of hard work.

Those were great days in many ways, free from conventionalities. The pioneers could be themselves, eat the simple foods, and not worry about

what to wear. There were not many Joneses to keep up with. The plain calico dress and stiffly starched sunbonnet were considered sufficient for any occasion by the pioneer women who were so independent in thought that they never could have been slaves to fashion. They had far nobler ideals. Their ambition was to have homes of their own, to be self-supporting. They considered the duty of earning a living the important thing.

Every piece of wrapping twine was saved, wound into a ball to use for tying comforts and sometimes sew patches on clothing. Those were days of mending and patching. Wings of geese and other web-footed fowl were used as brooms. If the man of the house smoked a pipe, he would light his tobacco with an ember from the stove fire instead of using a match each time. Sorghum made from sugar cane was used largely for sweetening and on corn bread and biscuits as a spread. Pioneer women would walk several miles carrying a few dozen eggs or a roll of home-made butter to a little store to exchange for necessaries like soda, salt, matches, and thread. Some of the women would carry their shoes until they neared the store when they would put them on over their cotton stockings. On the way home they would again resume their barefoot economy and comfort. Most of the children went barefooted all summer.

Father's health was broken by exposure and exertion during the Civil War. After coming to Iowa he was often ill. One hot July day while digging rock on the homestead he suffered a sun-stroke which after a few months resulted in total blindness and deafness. He died in June, 1877. Mother was left on the homestead with three children. I was eight years old, my sister Gertrude was six, and little brother Johnny was only three.

Though the responsibility and labor of managing the farm was a great burden, mother faced the problem nobly. I learned to help with the work and as brother and sister grew they too did all they could. We would go to the field and pull the morning glories and pusley to feed the pigs. We herded the cattle on the prairie and oat stubble. We gathered the red roots in the field after the plow. When they were dried they made a hot fire.

We learned to milk very young and each of us had our pet cows. On frosty mornings we would get the cow up from her slumber and put our cold bare feet on the ground she had warmed, while we milked her. We taught the young calves to drink out of a bucket, and sometimes they would bunt the bucket, upsetting the milk on us.

A bounty was paid for gophers. We carried water to pour in their holes and snared them with

a string when they came up. This was a great game, besides making some cash for necessities.

But our most delightful task was to take buckets and gather wild strawberries. Before the prairie was used as an open cattle range the berries were abundant and large and more fragrant and finer flavored than any tame berries. We would return with many quarts. The strawberry shortcake mother would make and spread thick with butter and berries was a treat for the rich. We used to plan a dish of greens, lamb's quarter or red stem, to eat with hot biscuit dough.

Mother taught us the herbs and leaves gathered on the prairie that had medicinal value. Wild peppermint, pennyroyal, and others were used for colds and dysentery. We hung them to dry and steeped them, using the tea.

One of the winters when my father was ill my mother tried trapping. She walked a mile and a half across the frozen snow. One cold morning she slipped off the muskrat house into the water up to her shoulders but she managed to wade out with the bag of rats. When she reached home her clothes were frozen to her body. We children were so frightened at her appearance we hung to her crying, "Ma! Ma!" But she quieted us. Father being ill and deaf and blind never knew of it.

Another incident I shall never forget occurred when I was seven years old. We were playing close to the shallow well when Johnny fell in. The water was about four feet deep. Gertie and I ran crying to the house. Quick as a flash mother grabbed a chair, ran to the well, jumped in, got Johnny, held him up, and told me to hand her the chair. She balanced the chair some way, stood on it, and handed Johnny up to Gertie and me. We laid him down and then helped her out. She worked for some time before he breathed.

It is hard to imagine conditions in Pocahontas County seventy-five years ago in relation to the changes that have been wrought. In the lifetime of a single generation the swamp land has been drained and converted into fine farms, the whole region is dotted with towns, schools, and churches, fine roads bound every square mile, telephone and electric lines bring the luxuries of the city into every country home. In 1886 Gertie and Johnny died of diphtheria which has now been almost eradicated as a fatal disease. The incredible toil and fortitude of the early settlers laid the foundation for these remarkable achievements. Sun, soil, and man have produced one of the garden spots of the world.

MATIE L. TURNER BAILY