



MRS. P. M. CASADY

PIONEER WOMEN

MY reminiscences of pioneers and old settlers—the pioneer claims a little distinction because he was “first in”—has been confined mostly to the men, but the wives and mothers should not be forgotten. While they did not build houses, business blocks, churches, and schoolhouses, make laws, and lay the foundation of civic government, they did lay the foundation of what is most essential to good government, to a successful, progressive, and prosperous community. They were the home-builders, the moulders of child life. They left to succeeding generations a heritage in the character of their children (was there ever a settler’s cabin presided over by a childless woman), who have, with fidelity to their early training, perpetuated the nobility of their maternity upon the county and town, so that the character and influence of the pioneer matrons is woven into the warp and woof of our civic life.

It was the mother who bore and cared for the babies, cared for the house, looked after the garden, milked the cows, and made the butter, dressed the fowls, gathered and preserved the wild fruit, did the family knitting and sewing, fried out the fat for and dipped the candles, helped in the fields, and did the thousands of things a good mother finds to do from four o’clock in the morning until night hours, when all others of the family are in bed asleep.

It required courage and self-abnegation for those women to turn their faces from homes and kindred in the more civilized communities, many of them homes of plenty, and environments pleasing to woman’s nature, to make new homes, and endure the hardships, sickness, want, and unending toil during the best years of life, to build up a new civilization.

There were also the trials and discouragements of housekeeping with meager facilities or improvised substitutes.

Their first experience was a log cabin, often one room, which was parlor, living-room, bedroom, and kitchen, with oiled paper

windows, puncheon floor, and so well ventilated the stars could be seen through the openings. For water, a hole in the ground, without wall or curb, or a far-off creek or river.

Cooking was done by fireplaces of rude construction. For bread-making and biscuit, an iron skillet was heated over coals on the hearth, the dough put in, a heated cover placed over the skillet, and covered with live coals. A Dutch oven was sometimes used, with an open front, and set before the fire. Coffee was boiled in a vessel on coals drawn out on the hearth. Meats and vegetables were cooked in iron pots and kettles. Corn bread was usually cooked on hot pone-cake boards. Corn bread, pork, and rye coffee were the staple foods. Sometimes there was no flour nor corn meal; mills were far away, roads impassable, rivers flooded and unfordable. Meal could be had only by pounding up the corn, or "jinting" it, which consisted of turning a carpenter's plane bottom up and shaving off the corn from the cob. There were many occasions when whole families went to bed hungry because "father" was delayed in getting home from the mill.

The experience of the pioneer of the town and country was much the same, the difference being in their nearness to each other. In the country, isolation was a saddening condition for the pioneer woman, the story of which could be found in the records of an asylum for the insane.

Mrs. Judge Casady probably has not forgotten her introduction to pioneer life. Raised in comparative luxury, the daughter of a well-to-do physician, F. C. Grimmel, she arrived here in a covered wagon, after a long and weary journey from Ohio, in August, 1846, at ten o'clock in the night. There was not a vacant place in which the family could unload the wagons, and the night was spent in camping. The next day, the abandoned log Guard House, with its iron-barred windows and doors, was secured, and there, at Vine and Third streets, the Summer and Winter were spent. The next year, her father bought one of the Government warehouses, made of plank, tore it down, and made a small dwelling-house of it, near the corner of Sixth and High. In 1848, she married the Judge, who built a small frame house on the corner now occupied by Clapp's Block, where she lived a few years, and adapted herself to the contingencies of the times and place. There were no sidewalks (sic) nor



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pavements. In wet weather, and on rainy days, the mud was deep, and passable only by donning the Judge's boots. It was the habit of the pioneers to adapt themselves to circumstances and conditions. She will pass her eightieth birthday the Nineteenth of the present month.

The little community at The Fort often got hungry; the larders got bare; provisions got scarce. When the soldiers retired, and the surplus of the commissary stores of the garrison were sold, it was a great boon, for there were many families with little or nothing to eat in the house. Rice was sold for two and one-half cents per pound; pork, three cents; eggs, three cents a dozen, and sugar less than one-fourth price.

Said Mrs. J. M. Griffith to me one day: "I never knew what it was to want for anything, or be hungry, until I came to Fort Des Moines. It was not because there were not means to procure it, but it could not be found. I was often hungry from scarcity of food supplies. I also got so satiated and tired of corn bread, bacon and dried apples, I thought I could not endure them, but I got used to them—I had to."

Mrs. Isaac Cooper also braved the trials and vicissitudes of life in a cabin, and its scanty comforts. There was but one chair for all, sufficient when there were no "callers." To supply the deficiency, Isaac fashioned one from a Black Walnut tree, and the bark of Linnwood. Her children wore out their shoes, as children proverbially do. There was no shoemaker—he had not arrived—and the father again came to the rescue by making some shoes from the leather of saddles the soldiers had discarded. While they were not as fashionable as the "Sorosis" of the present day, they did good service. Mrs. Fred. Hubbell doubtless has a vivid recollection of those shoes, and the exquisite pleasure of "breaking them in."

Mrs. Nancy Barns was born in Virginia, May Twenty-fifth, 1820, and when a child, her parents removed to Miami County, Ohio. In 1855, with her husband, William S. Barns, she went down the Ohio River, thence up the Mississippi to Keokuk, thence by wagon to Fort Des Moines. She has a memory replete with reminiscences of the trials and deprivations of the early days. Her husband for many years had a general store on Second Street.

When they came to The Fort, the only way to get a house was to buy a lot and build. He went to Summerset to get lumber for a house. The mill owner could not furnish the lumber, would not rent the mill, so he bought the mill and some trees, sawed the lumber, hauled it to The Fort with oxen, and built a small house, "out on the hills," at what is now Tenth Street, and there Mrs. Barns still resides. In the early days, she took an active part in the social life of the town. Despite her eighty-five years, she is as young in spirit and vivacity as most persons half her age.

The severest trials and deprivations were among the settlers in the country, hardly conceivable now, when is seen the beautiful homes and magnificent farms of the present occupants.

George Beebe, who started the well-known "Beebe Settlement," a few miles north, built a cabin in 1846. There was no chinking between the logs, and the wolves would come in the night and stick their noses through the cracks, badly frightening Mrs. Beebe and the children when her husband was absent. In the Summer time, snakes would crawl into the cabin, only to be discovered by the terrified shrieks of a little tot, or when turning down the bedclothes to lay him away to sleep. Prairie fires in the Fall would sweep around the cabin, the flames leaping high in the air, threatening destruction of everything in their path, the mother and children watching with terror lest it sweep away their home. Often the flour was scarce, and the primitive mills, just starting, had no appliances for bolting it. Mrs. Beebe contrived one by using a box, on one side of which she fastened some coarse woven cloth, in which was put the flour, and the box shaken back and forth on slats laid on stools or chairs.

Elijah Canfield, who became a prominent and wealthy farmer in Camp Township, started out with a log cabin sixteen feet square, with stick chimney and fireplace of small stones. Wolves and rattlesnakes were a constant source of terror to Mrs. Canfield and the children. During the Summer of 1846, there was an epidemic of ague in the settlement, seven of the family were sick, two died, and only the father, himself enfeebled, was able to attend the funeral, neighboring farmers performing the duties of sepulture. During the sickness, the supply of flour and meal was exhausted, and the



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father started to Oskaloosa to get them. While absent, he was prostrated with sickness. There were no mail facilities, for getting information respecting his delay, and his family were very greatly alarmed and distressed by his long absence and the need of supplies. The mother, worn out with care and worry, debilitated by sickness, was unable to look after the cows; they wandered away, went dry, and there was great suffering.

Isolation was one of the most serious burdens of the pioneer women. With few or no amusements, or little to divert the mind from constant toil, they sometimes broke down completely.

While the pioneer women suffered much, they also enjoyed much that will never be duplicated in Polk County. They had a monopoly of life, near to Nature, with all its experiences, advantages and privileges which will not come to any succeeding them.

The present generation can hardly have a conception of the evolution from the wild, blank prairies and river valleys to the magnificent farms, thriving, progressive cities and towns; from the "prairie schooner," horseback mail carrier, and stage-coach to the electric car, telephone, sewing-machine, electric light and power, all of which were unknown to the pioneers.

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