

JOHN F. WINTERROWD

One of the pioneers of Polk County, closely identified with its early history, was the venerable and well-known John Francis Winterrowd.

Born in Indiana, where he grew to manhood, he came to Polk County in May, 1850, with a party of twenty-seven, among whom was John Barlow and family, and "Uncle Billy" Dawson and family. They came with the proverbial prairie schooners, not so idealistic a group as Blashfield has pictured at the State House, but the real emigrant outfit. They crossed the Mississippi at Keokuk, and made their first stop in the county at "Uncle Tommy" Mitchell's tavern—there were no hotels in those days—where everybody stopped and rested to get their bearings before entering the "promised land," for there was no other tavern between what is now Marengo and Fort Des Moines.

Winterrowd and his family stopped for a few weeks on a settler's claim near what is now Rising Sun, and then moved into what was known as the old "Uncle Jerry" Church house, near the mouth of Four Mile Creek. "Uncles" were numerous in those days, and helpful to newcomers.

Winterrowd purchased a claim of Francis Stewart, two miles southeast of Rising Sun, on which was a double log cabin, which consisted of two cabins, with an open space between equal to one of the cabins. The space was roofed over and used for placing wagons, plows, harness, saddles, etc. One cabin was used for a living-room, the other for a stable. The space between the logs was chinked with clay, the chimney built of sticks and clay, with a large fireplace, in which all the cooking was done. There was but one room. At night, the sleepers were partitioned off by curtains. There was little protection against Winter storms. The Winter of 1856 will long be remembered by that community for its severity and the suffering it caused.

A record kept there shows that in January the mercury dropped to thirty-five below zero on the Fourteenth, thirty-six below on the Seventeenth, thirty below February Tenth, and four below on April Fourth. The snow was deep and blizzards frequent. There being little or no protection for live stock, farms were dotted with hundreds of cattle frozen to death, many of them cows, so necessary to family support, their carcasses affording a good feast to wolves and birds of prey, thus attracting them to the settlements to commit depredations and destructiveness in other ways.

Sometimes flour got short, when corn meal and bacon became a steady diet, though with a gun and a few hours' time, wild turkeys and prairie chickens could be substituted for the bacon.

The first lights used in the cabin were "grease lamps," that is, a twisted rag placed in a dish of grease fried out of bacon, which did service until a fat steer furnished tallow to make candles, when candle dipping became a stunt for the youngsters, to furnish them amusement and keep them out of mischief.

A small flock of sheep furnished wool for family use. Mrs. Winterrowd washed the wool and prepared it for picking, which done, the women of the neighborhood would be invited to a "wool picking," which was made a social gathering, and jolly good time. With the wool picked, she carded it by hand, spun it into yarn, wove it into cloth, and made the clothes for the boys. She also wove bedspreads of neat design, and a quality not duplicated in the stores to-day, even after fifty years' service, and which are now held as treasured heirlooms by the only daughter, wife of "Dave" Witter.

Despite the trials and deprivations, the family often declared they were never happier or enjoyed life better than when in the old log cabin.

In 1855, the family having increased to the swarming period, a two-story frame, 18 x 40, with an "L" 16 x 18, was begun. Native lumber, mostly Black Walnut, was used. The boards were all planed by hand, and Captain Zachary, a well-known character in the early days, split, shaved and made the shingles. Carpenters were scarce, and two years passed before the house was completed, an event recognized by a jollification and "house warming."

Among its furnishings were rugs and carpets which the good mother wove from wool she spun. The house is still standing on the farm in evidence of its good construction.

Contemporaneous with Winterrowd, the Barlows and "Uncle Billy" Dawson started a settlement farther north, on the prairie. The prairie settlers very soon manifested a disposition to improve their social condition with churches, schools and good roads, but the settlers in the timber belt, who had come in several years before, were inclined to turn a cold shoulder to them, and not disposed to give them much assistance or encouragement, but they soon so increased in numbers as to work out their various enterprises, in all of which Winterrowd was an important factor. In 1855, when the Christian Church Society was organized, the first in the county, he was one of its members, and gave the site on which to build a meeting-house, on his farm. He also gave the site for the first schoolhouse in that section, and the first cemetery. The farm of twelve hundred acres was for many years a notable place, and especially during the Spring Creek oil excitement, in 1865, when one Tichenor, a Chicago sharper, leased privileges to bore for oil all over the farm, and the chug-chug of the borer resounded over the prairie until he had drawn in enough suckers to fill his pockets with about thirty-five thousand dollars, when the doping of the springs on the creek with crude petroleum ceased, and the bottom fell out of the whole business.

In 1867, the sorghum craze struck the farmers, and they started in to raise cane to supply saccharine enough to sweeten the whole country, and drive Cuba out of the business; and they did raise good cane. It was on Winterrowd's farm the first sorghum was made in Polk County. He purchased an iron rolling mill, costing one hundred dollars, with which to crush the cane. Farmers from all over the county brought cane to the mill to have it crushed by the tons. For his own use, big kettles were swung to a hanging pole to boil the juice. A fire was started to run day and night, and in spite of smarting eyes from the smoke from the wood, and scorching heat, the scum must be skimmed off every few minutes by the tenders, from the surface of the boiling mass. Along about midnight, supper is ready, and such a supper!

Smoked ham and eggs, potatoes roasted in ashes, and coffee sweetened with syrup. And then a smoke with a corn-cob pipe, and story-telling, or taking turns in tending the fire, wrapped in a horse blanket take a nap on a bench. When sugaring-off time came, the neighbors and their children were invited, and a regular jollification was had, an event which, said Mrs. Witter, a few days ago, "I shall never forget. We had the time of our lives."

From Winterrowd's first product, he put three barrels of syrup in the cellar, to sweeten the coming flapjacks.

The greater profit in cattle, hogs and horses, however, soon obliterated sorghum-raising in Polk County.

The energy and the enterprise of that community of settlers resulted in the organization of the town of Rising Sun, which, in 1860, became a place of considerable importance, and a good trading-point for the surrounding country. Winterrowd had a contract at one time for hauling merchandise from Keokuk to the town.

He and his good wife were noted for their generous hospitality. The latch-string of their cabin door was always outside. They were fond of society, especially young people. One occasion, their children will never forget. There were seven boys and one girl—"Dave" Witter later captured the girl—and they were told to invite all the young people in the neighborhood, which meant a circuit of ten miles, to a Christmas dinner. Promptly on the morning of that day, about one hundred youngsters put in their appearance at the old log house, bringing their appetites and jollity with them. They remained during the day and evening, some of them until the next morning. The turkeys were roasted in the big fireplace, also one goose, probably the first in Polk County, for a goose was not then considered very edible.

Their home was also headquarters for pioneer preachers and their families. Among the gospel missionaries who frequently stopped there was Father Jessup, Father J. P. Roach and P. T. Russell. Once a week was also held an old-fashioned singing school, to wrestle with the old-style square notes and rehearse good, old Mear, Coronation, Lenox, Dundee, Rock of Ages, and other soul-stirring tunes.

What old-timer does not recall the fugues, especially the paraphrase of the One Hundred and Twenty-third Psalm, respecting the pleasure of

brethren dwelling together in unity, which was "like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard, that went down to the skirts of his garments," for when the singers got wanned up, it would be rolled out something like this, somewhat disjointed, but with force and vigor, getting all together at the close:

"Ran down his beard, and e'er his head _____
 _____ his robes,
 And o'er his robes _____
 His beard, _____ his robes,
 Its costly _____ moist _____
 Its-costly-moisture-shed."

Winterrowd was public-spirited, charitable, and took an active part in educational affairs; helped organize the first school district in that section, build the first schoolhouse, and for many years was one of the School Directors. His home was the home of school teachers, free of expense.

Politically, he was a Free Soil Democrat, of the most radical type, but took no active part in politics.

In 1874-1875, having acquired a competency and many broad acres—he never sold an acre in his life—and admonished by passing years of the need of rest, he divided up his property, giving each son a farm, the daughter a fine home in Des Moines, and became a resident of the city until his decease, in October, 1905, at the age of eighty-seven, leaving the heritage of a noble, Christian life, devoted to the betterment of society and the good of posterity.

April Fifteenth, 1906.