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Indians at Gray's Ford

Ninety-five years ago my grandfather, Ebenezer A. Gray, left Ohio with his wife and three small children and came to Cedar County, Iowa. They came by boat down the Ohio River and then up the Mississippi River to Muscatine, which at that time was called Bloomington. There grandfather bought a covered wagon and a yoke of oxen. With this outfit they set out across country in a northerly direction looking for a place to settle. The Cedar Valley seemed most attractive and there they decided to make their home. In the timber along the Cedar River near a shallow place where the stream could be forded they blazed their claim. The place, a few miles up the river from Rochester, is still known as Gray's Ford.

Grandfather immediately set about building a log cabin. The country was very new and wild. There were only a few white settlers for miles around. A band of Sauk and Fox Indians, however, had a camp nearby, and it was not long before a big brave came to call upon the new neighbors.

The Gray family was much pleased with this

friendly red man and a warm friendship sprang up between the Indians in that vicinity and the Gray family. The ties of friendship were never broken by either the Indians or the Grays. Even now the Gray grandchildren feel kindly toward the red men; indeed, we feel a deep sense of gratitude toward the Indians of long ago, for they welcomed the Gray family and did all they could to make their life pleasant and comfortable.

During the first months, the Indians came often to the Gray cabin and soon the white family learned to speak the Indian language. Some of them helped to clear a little patch of ground and in many ways helped the newcomers. In return for this kindness grandfather made guns for them, for he was a gunsmith by trade. Naturally he had brought his tools and set up a little shop.

Grandmother was an energetic, thrifty, Welsh woman, and looked well to the ways of her household. She had white flour and made things in a culinary way that pleased the Indian's palate. The little Indian girls often came to play with my aunt. You know how hungry children get while playing. How they did enjoy the bread and butter and little cakes which grandmother gave them to eat.

Once some squaws brought some maple sugar which they wanted to trade for white flour. On looking at the sugar, grandmother saw it was

dirty and said she did not want it, but she got some of her own maple sugar and explained to them how she made it. Then she directed them to make theirs the same way and she would trade. They were pleased and showed by all their signs and guttural language that they would do it.

In about three weeks a half dozen ponies were led up to the cabin and to grandmother's surprise they were all laden with maple sugar. This sounds big, but the Indians had done exactly as they were told. Grandmother had taught them to hollow out little troughs of basswood in which to mold the sugar. They had done so, but each two quarts or thereabouts was put in a separate wooden trough all of its own, so there were many troughs and some sugar. Needless to say grandmother took the sugar and not only gave them the white flour but took two young squaws into the cabin and taught them to make a kind of white bread.

At another time the Indians wished to borrow a long-range gun. They said a large gray wolf was bothering their pony colts, and the wolf was so cunning and swift their bows and arrows could not reach it. Grandfather said they could have the gun if they would bring him the wolf hide. To this they readily consented and went off with the gun. In four days two Indians rode up, proudly

displayed a huge gray wolf pelt, and handed back the gun, but they wanted to keep the hide and tan it for grandmother. In a reasonable time the hide was tanned and brought back to her.

Sometime after this the Indians near Fort Des Moines wanted grandfather to stay all winter with them and fix their guns. He told them it was impossible for there would be no one to look after his family. Finally, however, after much talk, he said he would go if the Indian chief would promise to see that no harm came to his wife and children. But the Indian refused to assume that responsibility because the Sioux were getting quarrelsome. If they made war, the Sauks and Foxes would have to run, for the Sioux had many braves. After much controversy, however, it was agreed that grandfather would go and if the Sioux made war, the Sauk and Fox Indians were to take grandmother and the children with them in their flight. They would be much safer with friendly Indians than left in the warpath of a hostile tribe. But the war parties of the Sioux did not pass that way.

The Gray cabin had a low upper story reached by a ladder. On retiring at night grandmother would draw the ladder up and close the trap-door. Never once were they disturbed from their peaceful slumbers. Quite often on lifting the trap-door

early in the morning and peering down a very strange sight would confront her. There, lying on the wolf hide before the log fireplace, would be three or four braves rolled up in their blankets and sound asleep. She would come down and shake the sleepy Indians until they sat up. They were waiting for grandmother's approval of the fine young deer they had brought all dressed and ready to cook. Often she gave them their breakfast and then they would silently slip out and disappear in the woods. Such huge piles of wood they left for her, and such choice gifts of wild game — deer, bear, pheasants, turkey, and quail — more than the family could use.

One morning a strange Indian dashed up to the cabin and in sign language made it known to grandfather that he desired to borrow a long steel knife. A member of his tribe had a thorn in his hand and they were unable to get it out. The Indian told grandfather he was a Sioux and had travelled all night to get there. The knife was brought out and the Indian was instructed how to use it. Then grandmother gave him some clean cotton cloth and told him how to bind up the wound. Grandfather invited the Indian to leave his jaded pony and take one of the Gray ponies, which he was glad to do. He promised to return the knife and the pony when the moon was "so

high" — making a sign and pointing to the sky. Yes, he brought them back on time, and told grandfather about the wonderful medicine in the knife and clean cotton bandage.

Years passed. The white settlers came and occupied most of the land. The Indians were driven farther and farther west. At last none was left in Iowa, except some who returned to buy a few acres of their own along the Iowa River in Tama County.

When I was about ten years old we were visiting at grandmother's and one morning we saw father hurrying toward the house. He told us that a band of Indians had come down the river to pay a last visit to Gray's Ford. Great excitement prevailed in the Gray household then.

After noon we all went to the river, about a half mile away. There were only two of the older Indians along with them, a man and a woman. They had come to visit with grandfather and grandmother once more. Many of the younger ones had never been to Gray's Ford and took a great deal of interest in exploring the surrounding woods.

We children were greatly interested in watching an Indian mother swing up a hammock made of a blanket. Then she lay her tiny papoose in and sang it to sleep, very much as a white mother

does. We arrived in time to watch them fix their camp fire and cook their dinner.

After their meal was over they all assembled in a pow-wow group, with the Gray family included. The Indians talked broken English and made many signs to which our folks nodded their heads and tried to make them understand that we were glad of their visit to Gray's Ford, and hoped they would enjoy their stay. I was brought forward and told to count the Indians, which I did in their language. They all began to smile. Some even laughed out loud. They were much pleased, for they knew grandfather still remembered them because he had taught his grandchildren to count.

ADA GRAY SMITH

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