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The Memoirs of Matilda Peitzke Paul

edited by Glenda Riley

Matilda Peitzke was the youngest of nine children born to Ferdinand and Wilhelmina Kant Peitzke. The Peitzkes migrated from Germany to Wisconsin in 1854 with hopes of providing a more comfortable life for their children. By the time Matilda was born in 1861, the Peitzke family had moved to Stacyville, Iowa. Four years later the family relocated again; in 1865 they purchased a farm near Riceville where Matilda's father planned to construct a brick home for the family.

Much of Matilda's life revolved around the Riceville homestead. She played and worked on the farm, she enthusiastically attended local schools, and after her father's death in 1870 she spent six arduous years helping her family finish the brick house and farm the land. Shortly after her mother abandoned the Riceville farm in 1876, Matilda became engaged to Ferdinand Charles Paul. When they married in 1880 they were able to recover the old Peitzke homestead which then became the Paul family home for many years.

Matilda, only 18 at the time of her marriage, ably shouldered the duties of a wife and, within the first year of marriage, the responsibilities of a mother. All four of the Paul children (Mabel, Amy, Edna, and Alice) were born in the brick home. The Paul family lived a modest yet full life until 1931 when Ferdinand Paul died. Matilda and her daughter Mabel moved to Clear Lake where they experienced another personal tragedy when Matilda's 50 year old daughter Amy died within the following year.

It must have seemed like the end of an era for Matilda Paul, yet she found other things to make her last years pleasurable: the company of her three daughters and her grandchildren, the writing of her memoirs, and the comforts of her new home. Her death in 1938 at age 77 concluded a long life which began in frontier Iowa and ended in modern, twentieth-century Iowa. Although Matilda Paul refused to believe that she was remarkable in any way, she was the prototypical pioneer woman who worked hard, made the best of life on the frontier, and as her youngest daughter Alice Paul Butz recalls, relied on humor and religion to cushion the rough spots in her active and demanding life.

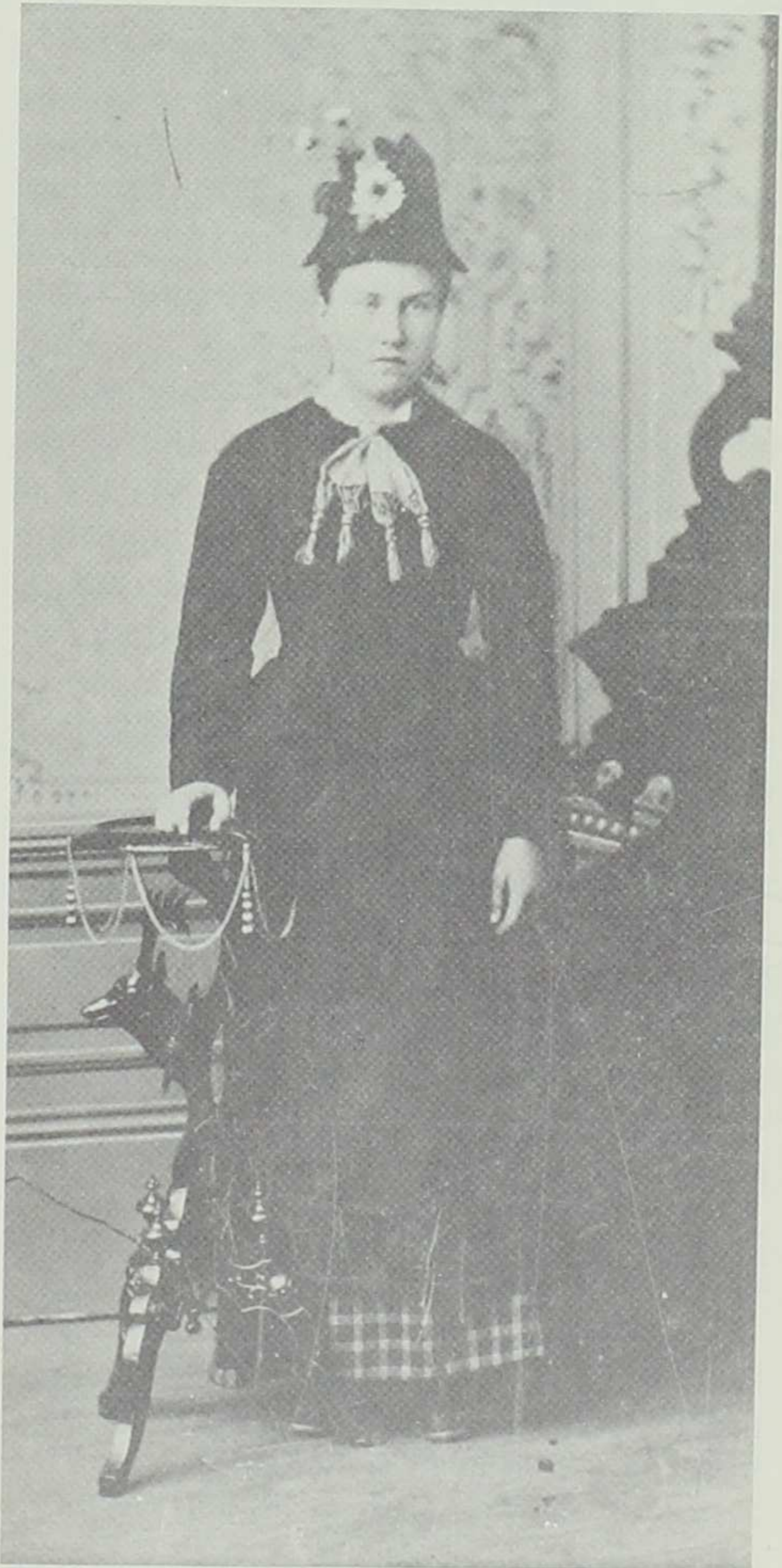
My memory takes me back to the summer of 1865 when I was four years old. I lived with my parents on a farm near Stacyville. My father cut all the wheat with a cradle and the hay with a scythe at that time. My next oldest brother bound all the grain and raked up all the hay with a homemade hand rake. He also helped do the stacking. He was less than 16 years.

One afternoon in the summer of 1865 the stage driver stopped at our door bringing a pale and sick-looking passenger. It was my oldest brother who was returning from the Civil War. He was sick most of

the time while in the South and on duty as a soldier, unable to march or take an active part, and finally was dismissed and brought home sick and unable to sit up. My mother and father were writing to him when he arrived not knowing he was on his way home. You can hardly imagine with what joy he was greeted. He was very weak and slept most of the time for a long time after coming home. He was too young to be drafted to go to war, but was hired as a substitute by a man who had been drafted. My parents knew nothing about his plans until after he had gone as he was working away from home. [He] was very young, only a few months past 17 years old when he returned home in the summer of 1865.

In the summer of 1865 father bought a farm in Howard County, two miles north of Riceville just across the line from Mitchell County. There was an old log house and a straw shed on it. The house was about 12 x 18 all in one room, with one door and one window. There was a low upstairs all in one room without a window. Had to climb a ladder to get up to it to go to bed. The roof on the house was very poor, and the snow often drifted onto our beds at night while we slept. In the summer when it rained we used all our pans and pails to catch the water trying to keep the beds dry. A shallow hole under our house answered for a cellar, and when we needed potatoes we lifted up one of the wide floor boards to get down in.

Had no well on the place when we moved there. Had to carry all the water up a long steep hill from a little stream.



Matilda Peitzke at age 16, from an old family tintage.

There was not much land cleared nor broke when we moved there so there was plenty of hard work ahead.

The day we left our home at Stacyville, we loaded what little furniture we had, consisting of three chairs, cook stove, home made table and cupboard, two benches we used in place of chairs, and two large wooden chests that were brought from Germany, some beds and bedding.

The first winter, there was no school in our neighborhood but the next four summers had a few months of school in the old Still House. It was built of logs. For seats there were long benches placed on three sides of the room. Had no desks or table to write on, instead had a slanting shelf across one side of the room attached to the wall. When occasion came to use a desk, we turned and faced the wall while writing or working arithmetic.

We got our drinking water for the school from a spring about a quarter of a mile away. It was considered a favor to go after water; consequently we changed off. When the water came our teacher would let us pass it, first to teacher then to pupils, all drinking out of the same long-handled tin dipper.

Farmers in pioneer days had no pastures. The cattle roamed at large. The grain fields were fenced with rails. The farmers cut down trees and split them up in strips which they used for building fences. We turned the cattle out of the cow yard in the morning to go in any direction they pleased. Towards evening we children had to hunt for the cows until we found them. The leading cow wore a



A cow bell used by the Peitzke family when Matilda was a child.

bell which was fastened to her neck with a strap buckled around her neck. Often we had a hard time locating our cows as it was nothing uncommon to find them several miles from home. All bells had different sounds; I now have the one we used when I was a child and its ring still sounds familiar.

We as well as children of other families were required to herd our cattle certain times of the year, and sometimes when the weather was sunny and not too cold we really enjoyed it, but often when it was cloudy and chilly it was very tiresome and plenty hard enough to keep them from getting into the corn fields.

I must also tell a little about the way milk was taken care of. While we lived on our farm there were no creameries nor cheese factories, the milk was put in pans to cool and left long enough for the cream to come to the top which was about 24

hours, then the cream was skimmed off with this kind of skimmer and kept in a cool place if there was one, until there was enough cream to make several pounds of butter in a dash churn.

I remember how I used to dread to have mother call me and tell me to help with the churning. It seemed as if the butter never would come; sometimes it did take hours to churn. There was no ice to be had to keep milk or cream cool; and it had to be kept in the cellar if there was one; and if there was no cellar, the next best thing had to be done; and it all made plenty of work.

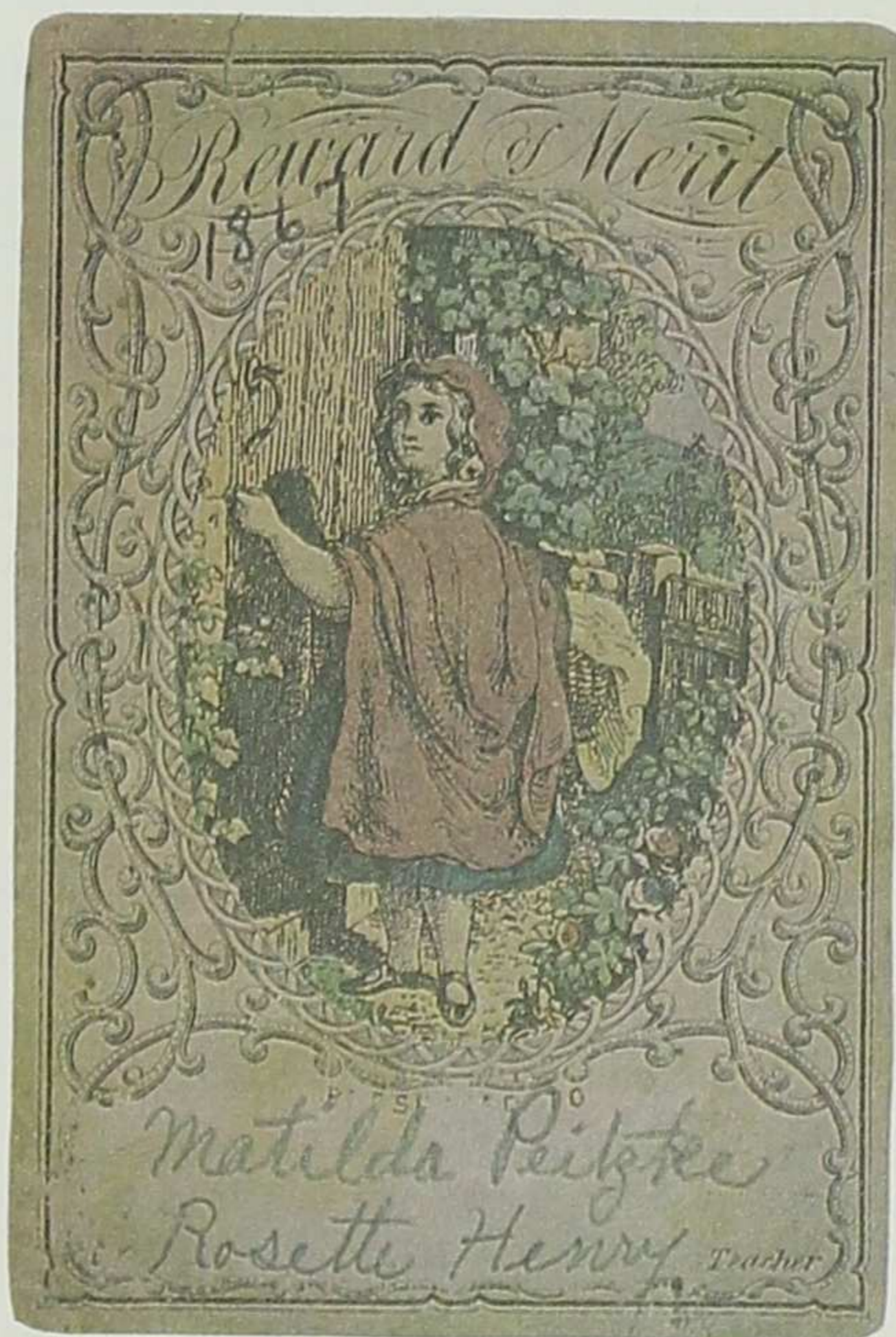
I will tell a little more about our school days while living on our farm north of Riceville, nothing so thrilling but we learned a little and always had plenty of fun. Our teachers had very little education and schools were not graded. [We] usually started at the front of our book at the beginning of every term and went as far as we could, then start[ed] all over again at the beginning of next term. [We] stood up in a row when we spelled, and some teachers gave a prize to the one who [was] left.

We played many games at school, such as Pussy wants a Corner, Pull-Away, I am on Dickies Land, Ring around the Rosie, Needles Eye, Drop Handkerchief, Poison, and other games. It still thrills me when I think of it. Often in the winter we slid on frozen ponds and slid down hill and snow balled each other.

I must mention flies and mosquitoes which tormented pioneers. There were no screened doors nor windows and flies were so thick in the houses and all over every-

thing, we used a little limb, thick with leaves, to keep them off food while we ate. That is too terrible to dwell on. Later on had window and door screens made of mosquito netting. Every morning the flies had to be chased out of doors, with branches covered with leaves. Mosquitoes were so plentiful one could hardly endure their bites before the day of screens; we gathered up very fine chips at wood pile and made a smudge and kept it going to keep mosquitoes from tormenting us.

Then there were many kinds of snakes. The little green snake, garter snake, hoop snake, spotted water snake, and worst of



An award of merit won by Matilda at her school.

all the poisonous rattle snake which sometimes killed people. I was bitten by one when I was around 12 years old, but was doctored up right away by placing my foot in mud and keeping it in fresh mud for about six hours, and it left no ill effect. They also gave me a little whisky. Thus one poison offset another.

My father was a brick-maker by trade, and we had been living in our old log house for nearly four years. By the spring of 1869 he had gotten things in shape to begin making brick and build a new house, but his health failed and he had to give up the work before he burned the brick. He then had very poor health until his death on January 25, 1870. My brother William had to go ahead with the farm work that summer; father did stack the grain by having someone hand each bundle to him. After father got too weak to do any outside work, he spun yarn for stockings, and when spinning got too hard he knit woolen stockings for the family. In pioneer days no one in a small town kept ready-made coffins, but were made by a carpenter when needed. [Father's] funeral was held at the Baptist church in Riceville and he was buried in the Riceville cemetery.

In the spring of 1870 we went ahead finishing up the brick for the new house and hired a couple of men to lay the brick and got the new brick house all done ready to move in by fall.

For the next three years William, who was then 20 years old, had to go ahead and do the farm work with the help of the younger children. Herman, the next

oldest boy at home, was 10½ years old the first summer after father died. We all helped what we could in the field. In the spring we younger children dropped the corn in the rows in planting time and the older ones covered it up with a hoe (there were no corn planters in pioneer days), also dropped potatoes. When the corn first came up we had to stay out in the field and chase the black-birds to keep them from digging and eating the corn as fast as it came up. It was our work in spring to pull weeds for the hogs for feed. We often had to watch our cattle to keep them out of other people's as well as out of our own fields. I think we had a reaper in the early '70s for cutting grain, but it had to all be bound by hand. Before I was old enough to bind grain I helped carry bundles in piles, ready to be shocked up.

In March 1876 Mother sold the farm to my sister Emma and her husband. Mother and I moved our furniture down to my sister Bertha's June 1, 1876, a week before I was 15 years old. Bertha let us have one room 15 feet square in her house to live till mother built a cottage right nearby for us to live in. I continued going to school the same as before; when there was no school I sometimes helped the neighbors some with house work, and I often did sewing for other people. We could buy no ready made garments but had to make all underwear dresses, and most of the ladies' and children's coats were homemade. Often the men's and boys' pants and jackets were homemade, so there was plenty of that kind of work to be had.

I drove horses on reaper for a neighbor

one harvest while we lived there; he paid me pretty well I thought. And the next year I drove harvester for Mr. George Smith who lived about two miles southwest of us. I got good pay there too. I think 50 cents a day and board. I got some money for clothes that way.

I met Grandpa [Mr. Paul] for the first time the fore part of March 1877—when he came to hire out to Fred Stark. I was nearly 16 years old. Little did I think then that he would be my life companion. He started to work the twentieth of March and worked there eight months. He presented me with a little beaded purse on my birthday the seventh day of June. He often came over to see us in the evening after his work was done. In July he asked me to be his wife, and after thinking it over from all angles, I promised him I would be his true wife as long as I lived.

On the thirteenth day of January 1880 Grandpa and I were married. I had a wine colored wedding dress made with a polonaise, and the skirt was trimmed with several rows of pleating and the polonaise with one row of pleating and a bias strip of velvet of the same color on top of the pleating. I had white ruching in the neck of the dress and pleating round the sleeves at the wrists and a nice white silk tie with little stripes of coloring of different designs across the ends. I had a velvet hat trimmed with white, a new black coat, and a cape trimmed with white ribbon. The cape was cut in a circular style and reached to my shoe tops. I had gloves and high shoes which laced up on side. I certainly felt that I was well dressed.

My sister Amelia was a dressmaker by trade, and she made my dress; I learned much of the art of sewing from her. I was busy all that autumn of 1879 getting my sewing done ready for housekeeping. I made enough quilts, sheets, and pillow cases for two beds. Mother gave me one feather bed and four goose feather pillows, [and] I had four linen table cloths, plenty of towels, and dish towels. I had all of ten dresses or more and plenty of underwear, all tucked and trimmed with ruffled embroidery, and several fancy night gowns, and this all kept me quite busy sewing.

Grandpa and I were certainly proud of our baby girls and took the very best care of them that we knew how. I made all their clothes by hand and enjoyed it. I really took pride and pleasure in the work, which I did mostly at night, after we rocked them to sleep. I did all the washing by hand, rubbing every garment, and often stood on one foot while rubbing and rocking the baby's cradle with the other foot to keep her from waking up.

Note on Sources

In 1935, Matilda Peitzke Paul's granddaughter, Mabel Ruth Haas, urged her to record her recollections of pioneer life in Iowa for her family. When the recollections were completed in 1936, Ms. Haas transcribed them into a typed document which she later deposited in the Manuscript Collection of the State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City. No segment of the memoirs has been published previously. Portions of the original have been deleted, and some minor changes made in grammar and punctuation for ease of reading. The excerpts and illustrations presented here appear with the generous permission and assistance of Matilda Peitzke Paul's two surviving children, Edna Paul Hammond and Alice Paul Butz of Clear Lake, Iowa.



A handbag made from the material of Matilda's wedding dress and the gloves and fan used on her wedding day.

We had considerable timber on our farm, [and] Grandpa sold wood. One time when taking a load of wood to town one of our colts was following its mother and ran into the pole wood which penetrated its lungs and killed it. This was a big loss to us financially; also a big loss because we had love for the colt.

During the years we lived there we often fed tramps. One morning four different ones begged their breakfast there, [and] we fed them. One summer evening after dark, two men stopped for bread and milk to eat [and] said they would pay us. They said they traveled nights and slept day times. They paid us each 10¢. We thought they were escaped convicts and were very much afraid of them. Their hair was cut close to their head.

Nearly every fall I made several gallons of apple pickles, canned plums, [and] mince meat. [The] several gallons of sauer-kraut added to the cucumber pickles, [which] I

had packed in brine, and the green tomato pickles gave us considerable things to eat. We always had our own meat and potatoes and wheat for flour. [We] also raised buckwheat to be ground into flour for pancakes. Some years we raised sugar cane for sorghum [and] gathered wild crab apples for sauce.

Together with all my sewing and knitting I made a hooked stair carpet and a number of hooked rugs, rag carpets, and so forth. It took 1¼ pounds of rags for a yard of carpet. I think I had my first rag carpet woven in 1888; I was so pleased with it and appreciated it more than you can imagine. It was made with bright stripes and "hit and miss" and certainly looked beautiful to me.

We still went on with our farming the best we could. Grandpa's health was poor, but he did what he could and I helped with the work, such as driving harvester, mower, and hay rake. In the fall I helped husk corn [and] picked up the potatoes. We usually raised around seventy-five bushel. Mabel and Amy [M.P.'s daughters] went to school, [and] we took Edna [a daughter] to the field and put her in a large box where she could play while I picked up potatoes. We built a new barn in the summer of 1887 or 1888; also a hen house. We had carpenters to do most of the work, but I helped Grandpa finish up.

Charlie VanAuken stayed with us several weeks during the winter of 1890. There were seven to do the work for. I did all the washing, on [a] board often standing on one foot operating cradle with other foot at same time. For the next year



The Paul family in 1894.

I had very little time to help Grandpa, but as he couldn't stand it to ride on the mower, he took care of Alice while I run that and the hay rake. I helped him do the milking. The girls took care of Alice. At that time we sold our cream which saved me lots of work. In the summer of 1891 we milked 12 cows; we had some of Mr. Biddle's cows and paid him for the use of them. That was the only time we ever milked so many cows.

We helped Grandpa considerable with the farm work. I quite often did a good share of the plowing, when we had a riding plow; also raked hay in haying time. Then the girls and I helped him pick up potatoes, and when it came time in the fall to husk corn the girls and I helped Grandpa with that, and it saved him hiring help. We enjoyed husking corn when the weather wasn't too cold, but sometimes it was altogether too cold for comfort, when there was even danger of freezing hands or feet.

Now I want to conclude my Memoirs. To me, what I have told doesn't seem worth while at all, for I cannot express myself as I should or would like to do. I must now tell about Grandpa's failing health. I noticed it very decidedly by 1928, and often I sat and looked at him, knowing he was failing fast. He also realized this and tried to get help by doctoring which gave some relief but nothing permanent. He not only tried Osteopathy, Electric machine, Chiropractic treatments, but several different kinds of medical doctors, sparing neither time nor means. At last he went to a hospital for medical treatment, but

everything he tried failed, and about two weeks after his return from the hospital his sickness proved fatal, and on April 9th, 1931, he breathed his last. Then everything was so different for me. I hardly knew what to do.

We rented [out] our farm by the last of May, had our sale the latter part of October, and moved to our present home November 9. Then, we had so many callers every day. Our old friends and neighbors certainly remembered us. I am glad too to have Edna and Alice living so close by, and am thankful for many other blessings I have. Now, Mabel and I are comfortably settled; we have gas heat, which makes it very convenient for us. □