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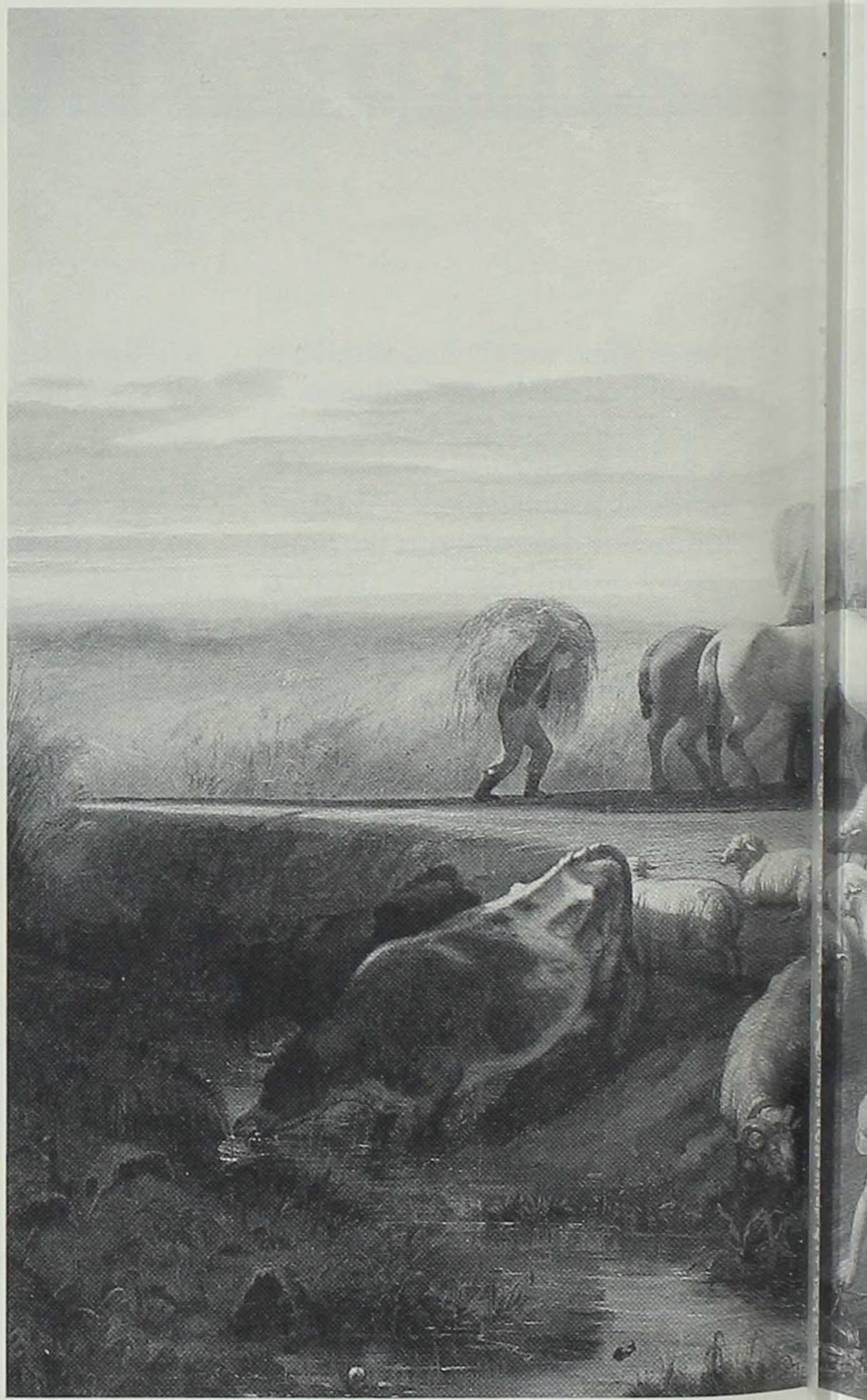
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# Prairie Partnerships

BY GLENDA RILEY

**T**HE RICH SOIL of Iowa held out great promise to pioneers who illegally "squatted" on it during the late 1820s and those who claimed it after the first eastern portions were officially opened for settlement in 1833. Yet the realities of climate, finances, and breaking the prairie to cultivation warned the thousands of potential migrants, who looked toward this newly available frontier region with incredibly high hopes, that settlement would be a difficult and challenging task. Establishing an Iowa farmstead was not an endeavor to be undertaken lightly nor was it one that could be tackled easily by an individual. Rather, prairie farming required many hands to achieve success; it virtually demanded the efforts of a large family unit based on a partnership of adults who, in turn, depended upon younger family members as auxiliary laborers.

The typical farm family in early Iowa therefore consisted of wife, husband, and their offspring. A grandmother, aunt or uncle, cousin, or other relative or friend might supplement the unit. The wife and husband formed the nucleus of the farm work team and provided it with leadership. (Thus, in spite of the common tendency to think of farmers as male, farmers were actually female and male.) Although the jobs performed by women and men were generally different in nature, both kinds of work were crucial to the progress of the farm operation. That farm women clearly realized their worth is revealed in the remark of a young Iowa woman whose mother contributed significant operating capital to the family farm through production and sale of milk and butter. "When masculine attitudes became too bumptious," the daughter declared, those women who rec-



ognized that they actually supported their families while the men learned to farm on the prairie "were quite capable of scoring a point."

The working partnership of a farm couple existed at even the initial stages of settlement. For example, in many families the wife and husband decided that one of them should travel to Iowa as an advance agent to locate and pay for a farmsite before the entire family migrated. Because the woman was charged with the care of children and travel conditions of the time were harsh, it was the man who undertook this task. The woman, however, prepared for the journey by readying food and clothing, often sewing a secret pocket into a shirt or jacket to safely carry the cash or land



Benjamin Franklin Reinhart: THE EMIGRANT TRAIN BEDDING DOWN FOR THE NIGHT. In the collection of the Corcoran Gallery of Art. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Lansdell K. Christie.

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Once the family decided to prepare for actual migration to Iowa, the female/male partnership was again very much in evidence. Together the couple sorted belongings, selling or giving away what would not be useful on the prairie. They also began the arduous task of making, gathering, and assembling all the things they would need. If they planned to travel by steamboat or railroad for part of the way to Iowa, the migrants had to hone carefully the list of items they wished to carry with them. Space limitations and high fares on boats and

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the "cars" dictated that travelers carry relatively little, even though an improperly equipped settler could expect difficulty and considerable expense in obtaining goods during the early years of a region's settlement. Those who migrated in some type of overland wagon were more fortunate; although the journey would be considerably longer and more trying, they would arrive confident that they were well prepared for the trials that lay ahead.

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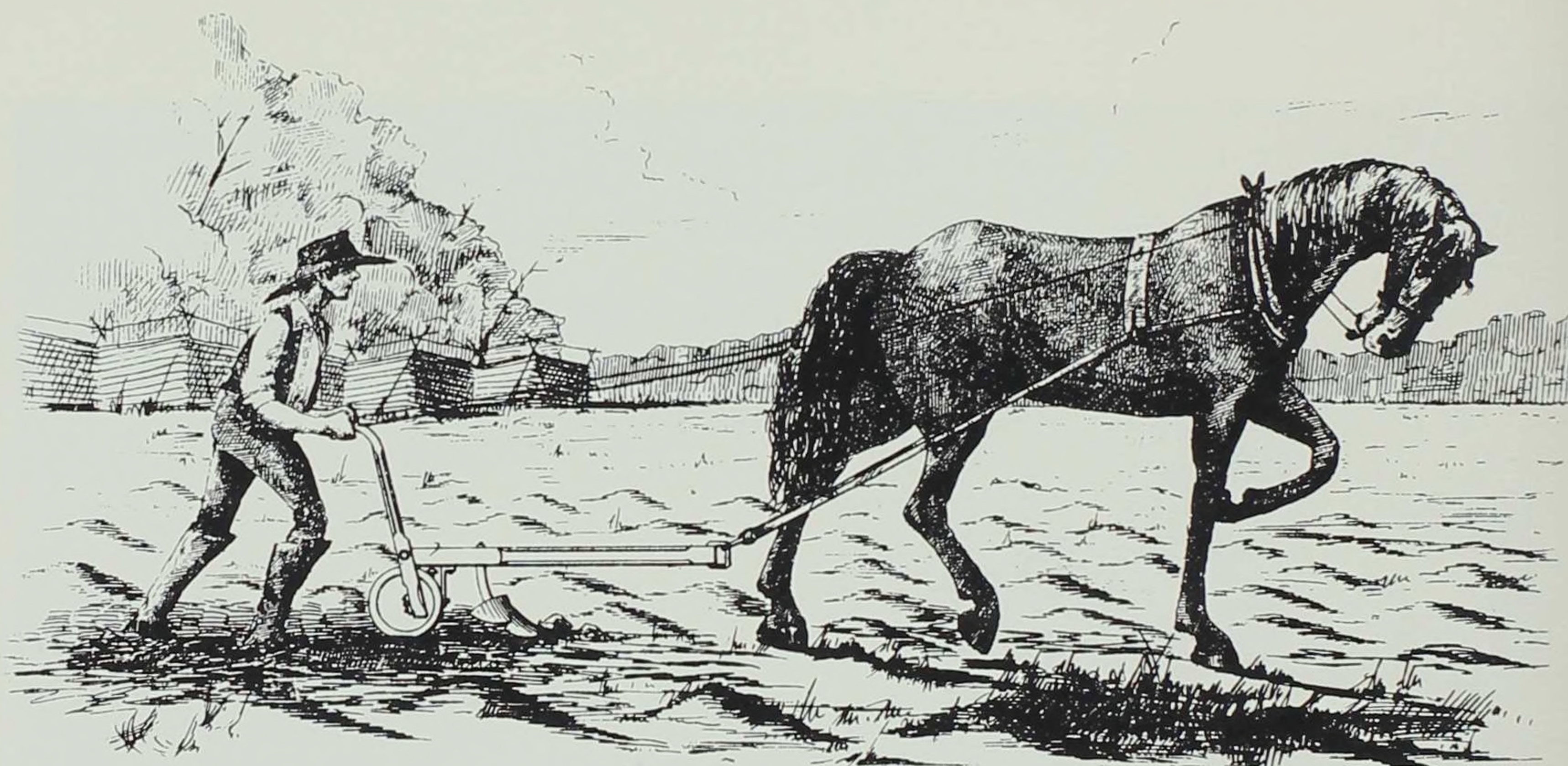
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migration itself and to the eventual development of a farmstead. It therefore received a great deal of care and attention. Men equipped the wagon box with wheels and axles and selected and trained the sturdy animals that would haul it and its precious contents to Iowa. Women hand-sewed a heavy canvas cover to protect people and goods from the rain and a lighter muslin cover to keep out sun and dust. Men added seed, animal feed, and farm implements to the wagon's cargo while women prepared food, clothing, and medicine. In the case of the Belknaps, who were among the thousands that poured into Iowa during the 1830s, George built an ingenious camp table, drilled his newly purchased oxen, and readied the other stock for travel, while his wife, Kitturah, dipped a year's supply of candles, filled home-sewn sacks with flour, cornmeal, and other foodstuffs, and devised an extensive medicine chest.

Once on the trail, women and men continued to share the critical tasks that would get them and their family safely to Iowa. They took turns driving the wagon or walking in the dust or mud with the children and animals. At the day's end, the women drew upon meager resources to prepare a nutritious meal, usually cooked over an open fire, while the men cared for the stock, greased wagon wheels and axles, fished or hunted to supplement food supplies, and frequently helped the women by perhaps setting up a table or tending the fire. Together numerous women and men attempted to recre-

ate domestic routines on the trail and to offset the duress of the journey as much as possible in order to prevent the disintegration of family unity.

If these Iowa-bound women felt uprooted and overwhelmed by their workload, as some recent observers have charged, they usually kept it to themselves. Rather, they leavened any complaints recorded in their diaries and letters with positive observations. As they trudged and struggled along the trail toward Iowa, many women took great delight in the prairie flowers, marveled at the vast sky overhead and the rich resources that lay beneath it, and thanked Providence for the opportunity to settle in the new Iowa Territory. Occasionally women even enjoyed camp life. One woman jotted in her diary, "I hear the merry notes of a violin. A general cheerfulness prevails." Another noted that "we spent the evening singing and talking. [Husband] Will played on the fiddle."

This is not meant to discount the rigors of the passage to Iowa. Even on steamboats or railroads, travelers encountered difficulties ranging from high prices and cramped quarters to illness and poor or nonexistent sanitary facilities. And whether on the trail or on other routes, children had to be cared for, amused, and kept from ever-present dangers that could easily cause harm or death.

Yet, in spite of its many demands, the journey to Iowa did end. One young traveler who had envisioned the trek as a "great adventure"

was now exhausted and saddlesore and glad that it was over. "We have a lot of weary miles behind us," she commented upon reaching her new home in Iowa. "Glad to have done it but would not care to do it over again, or very soon anyway." Thousands of others, bone-tired and tense with both anxiety and hope, tumbled out of wagons and other conveyances to confront their promised land. Although they had already invested a great deal of money, time, and energy in the venture, they realized that the travail of actual settlement was just beginning.

**B**Y MODERN STANDARDS the financial investment involved in this complex process of migrating and establishing a new farm was not great. But to a pioneer family in the 1830s and early 1840s the expense must have been daunting. In territorial Iowa, land often sold for \$1.25 an acre (the minimum price asked by the United States government until 1862, when the Homestead Act provided free lands in certain areas of the West). In addition, legal and claim fees often had to be paid. These expenses were followed by a series of outlays for such specialized equipment as breaking plows to rip through the tangled web of prairie grass roots, as well as nails, beams, and lumber for homes and outbuildings. Given their many expenses and the scarcity of building materials, it is not surprising that numerous settlers chose to build a simple sod hut, using strips of prairie sod plowed from their own land. As late as 1870, one person claimed to have built a sod house for only two dollars and seventy-eight and one-half cents. Nevertheless, estimates of migration and initial settlement costs average around fifteen hundred dollars, a sum that was considerable for people who usually had to sell everything they owned, deplete savings, seek loans, and draw upon land warrants awarded for previous war service (which could be used as payment for government lands) in order to fund the enterprise.

The financial burden of the settlement venture, intimidating as it might be to most migrants, was soon overshadowed by its psychological and physical demands. An initial

shock was the realization that the land of promise and plenty did not always appear quite so wonderful upon close inspection as it had in the sales literature, media, and word-of-mouth accounts. While "some like the new country," one woman observed, "others returned to their native States." Those who remained often had to adjust their view of the promised land to include prairie fires, blizzards, scorching heat, mosquitoes, snakes, and what one woman termed "wild beasts," along with the prairie flowers and vast skies that they so admired. Moreover, they soon learned that native peoples who were not anxious to leave their homeland sometimes reacted to white interlopers in less than a welcoming manner. One woman summed up the feelings of many new arrivals: "When we got to the new purchase, the land of milk and honey," she wrote, "we were disappointed and homesick, but we were there and had to make the best of it."

In most cases, migrants did have to "make the best of it." Turning back was an expensive and often impossible option. They had sacrificed everything — house, land, friends, family — to pursue a happier, healthier, and particularly a more prosperous future in Iowa. Disappointment aside, settlers quickly realized that only by pulling together, only by continuing the partnership that had gotten them this far, could they not only survive but also move their farming enterprise from the debit to the profit column within a few years. Most pioneers had not come to Iowa to live a life of subsistence, raising only what their own families needed and seldom seeing cash pass through their hands. Rather, they desired a quick entry into the market economy to bring them the profits that would help them create their own version of the good life.

With this end in mind, a family quickly established a division of labor based upon comparative strength, skills, and mobility. Most people probably did not see the frontier as an opportunity to break down and reshape traditional sex roles or customary ways of assigning family tasks, but it did provide a chance to utilize the old ways with more rewarding results. Generally the men went into the fields while the women stayed in and near the home and children. Together, women and men

formed a production system. The males supplied raw materials, such as corn, wheat, animals, hides, fish, and lumber produced from planting crops, tending livestock, hunting, fishing, or lumbering. These raw materials then went into the "factory" (in other words, the home) for transformation into finished products. In some instances, the raw materials could be sold for cash or traded for other items. In most cases, however, the raw materials first had to be processed in order to be consumed by the family, sold, or traded.

Because the raw materials were basic to the production process, the fields and field work usually became a high priority. As soon as some kind of basic shelter for the family was established, men turned their attention to breaking the prairie sod and planting crops. While this

prioritization is understandable, it also created problems for women who found themselves attempting to function as domestic artisans in hastily constructed and ill-conceived workplaces. Although this situation was usually alleviated over time, the workplace dimension of the home was seldom seen in the same light as that of fields, barn, and other outbuildings. Rather than being basic to the production of finished goods, raw materials were often believed to actually provide the family's livelihood. Thus women and men often agreed that the farming procedures outside the home should receive more thought and development than that same operation within the home. This kind of thinking often led to a lag between the two spheres of the farm production unit. Even in twentieth-century Iowa, farm women still



wondered why they cooked threshing dinners on wood-burning cookstoves for men who threshed on the latest gasoline-powered machines, or why their kitchens were inefficient and sprawling while barns, by contrast, were frequently marvels of efficiency and planning.

**T**HIS NECESSITY to get the fields in operation meant that many settlers lived, and women worked, in woefully inadequate shelters and workplaces. Wagons, tents, caves, lean-to's, cabins, and sod huts were all pressed into service. George and Kitturah Belknap, who had migrated to Iowa with George's parents, set up housekeeping in one room of a crude two-room, hewed-log house; George's parents crowded into the other room. Kitturah's diary notation reflects that need often dictated circumstances: "We unloaded and commenced business. Made us some homemade furniture and went to keeping house."

The cramped housing situation endured by many families usually improved with time. When possible, men transferred time and energy from the fields to the family's dwelling. They "raised" a more substantial building, usually sixteen by eighteen feet and made of logs. Women and children participated by carrying tools, chinking spaces between logs or laths, and providing meals for neighbors who came to help. Numerous women, realizing the importance of their menfolk returning quickly to the fields, did not hesitate to undertake much heavier tasks including digging cellars and wells and building fireplaces. At the same time, men continued to build furniture or plane window and door frames in odd moments. Gradually dirt floors gave way to slabs and finally to planks. Eventually lean-to kitchens graced the backs of houses and attics appeared above them, providing storage space and sleeping quarters for children.

That women had to become partners in constructing family dwelling places, a circumstance that probably would not have occurred in their former homes, did not seem to distress them. Women recognized that field work was a



sunup to sundown proposition for much of the year and that such work required a good deal of hand labor during the early era of settlement of the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s, and they frequently expressed great sympathy for their men. For example, noting that wheat crops had to be hand-cut with a cradle on their family farm, one woman remarked, "That was real hard work swinging a cradle all day." Another pioneer explained that her father cut "all the wheat with a cradle and the hay with a scythe," while her brother "bound all the grain, and raked up all the hay with a homemade hand rake." Another described men hand-planting grain by carrying sacks of grain on their shoulders as they walked through fields scattering the kernels before them.

Because hired labor was scarce even if a family could afford it, women sometimes joined men in field labor. A woman might hack a cross into the prairie sod with an ax, creating a hole into which a man would drop a few kernels of seed. Their child might follow, closing the openings with a well-placed footstep. Women also drove teams of plow animals, harvested crops, and performed other heavy field work in spite of nineteenth-century proscriptions that women were not capable of such feats.

When women worked in the fields, they generally did so as adjuncts to men. But that





was not always the case. Examples do exist of widowed, divorced, deserted, and never-married women who performed both segments of a farm operation — home and field. Often assisted by brothers, fathers, sons, or hired hands, these women were in the minority in early Iowa. But they certainly demonstrated that other types of partnerships than wife/husband could lead to a profitable farm enterprise.

**C**ERTAINLY FIELD WORK was taxing and involved rudimentary equipment, but the same can be said of the work performed within the home. Women and children labored at a huge variety of tasks, often with only the most basic of utensils and tools. Soap, for example, was not commercially available in territorial Iowa and thus was an important product of the “home-factory.” Its

production involved collecting grease, fat, and tallow from meat, saving wood ashes for lye, and then boiling these materials together to create a concoction termed "soft soap." The first two steps were year-long; the third was done outside in the springtime. Children helped the women measure grease and lye into a large iron kettle, stoke the fire under the kettle, and boil the substance until it reached the proper consistency. The liquid soap was then poured into cloth-lined boxes or crocks where it hardened. Later it was cut into bars and wrapped in straw for storage. Candle making was another time-consuming and complex procedure, also undertaken in the spring by women and children. Wicks were either repeatedly dipped by hand or hot tallow was poured into molds. Once firm, the candles were wrapped and stored with the soap until needed.

While soap and candle making illustrate the close working relationship that often existed between women and children, other chores demonstrate the interaction of females and males. Providing food, a never-ending task that involved producing, processing, and cooking, demanded the efforts of both women and men. For instance, corn, a staple of the Iowa pioneer's diet, was planted, tended, and harvested primarily by men. It was husked, dried, and ground by women and men. And it was converted into cornbread, mush, corncakes, corn pone, and hominy primarily by women. Beef and dairy products were a similar case. Fed, herded, and butchered largely by men, cattle provided meat, tallow, and milk, which were then processed into usable foodstuffs and goods largely by women. The resulting milk and butter were often sold, thus providing support for the family, not only while the men established themselves as farmers but while they paid off debts or bought new equipment with the profits from field crops.

**A**LTHOUGH THE ECONOMIC interdependence between females and males on early Iowa farms is clear, the power relationships that resulted are less so. Whether or not women participated to any extent in decision making is currently

under debate by scholars and other observers. One view hotly protests that women were not partners in the true sense of the word because it was the men who made major decisions, including the decision to migrate to Iowa in the first place. Another perspective suggests that women had a kind of power that does not fit the usual definition. For example, women did exercise a fair degree of choice — hence, power — in selecting a mate, because the ratio of men outweighed that of women during the pioneer period. Women could, and did, withhold their butter and egg money from projects they thought unworthy or unworkable. And because the home was also the farm woman's workplace, she ruled it, effectively limiting a man's power and participation in the domestic realm.

A brief examination of decision making in undertaking the Iowa migration suggests that this issue of relative power is not one that will be resolved easily. A common stereotype presents Iowa-bound women as simple appendages to men, as totally dependent on the male breadwinner of the family, who had the right to make, and always did make, the decision to move west. It is supposed that women submitted to the will of these determined husbands either because they felt economically or legally



required to do so or because they wished to obey or please them. Yet there are numerous cases of married women who actively supported or even initiated the idea of resettlement in Iowa. Like men, these women perceived Iowa as offering economic opportunities or better living conditions than those enjoyed in their present homes. Furthermore, many single women also chose Iowa. Some of these migrated as part of a larger family unit but had the choice to stay behind. Others migrated on their own to become teachers or missionaries or to find a husband on the male-dominated frontier. Thus, in opposition to the customary and widely accepted interpretation of women as subordinate to male decision makers, significant numbers of married and single women did migrate who were not forced westward by men.

At this point, it is unclear in which direction the debate will move next. As power is redefined to encompass both female and male terms, and as more women's documents become available and are examined from more perspectives, it is possible that early Iowa farm women may be imputed more partnership power than at present. On the other hand, evidence may accumulate that proves that although women's economic contributions were many and of great significance, women were not rewarded with any degree of influence in the realm of decision making.

Another current debate examines how much the economic partnership on early farms influenced the initial choice of a mate. Did men and women place more emphasis on the skills and work habits of a potential mate than on a highly romantic attachment, or "chemistry," as we would call it today? Extensive evidence demonstrates that women commonly graded men as "providers," and men judged women as domestic manufacturers. A recent study on frontier marriage argues further that "the choosing of a mate on the frontier was a matter of economic necessity far and above individual whim. Good health and perseverance were premium assets while the charm and ability to entertain that one values so highly in a society of mechanization and leisure time was only of tangential significance . . . the woman who could not sew nor cook had no place on the

frontier." Certainly the many advice articles that appeared in early Iowa newspapers counseled women to beware of alcoholics, gamblers, abusers, and other ne'er-do-wells, and counseled men to be suspicious of a fashionable front and to examine a woman's cooking and other domestic skills instead. Some source materials, especially anecdotal ones, demonstrate that even pioneers tripped over romance. Yet many more sources support the contention that one chose a mate at least as much for what that mate could bring to an economic partnership as for compatibility, appearance, or romantic appeal.

**B**ECAUSE SKILLS and knowledge of a farm operation were so crucial to future productivity, and probably to success in marriage as well, both females and males spent much of their childhood and young adulthood preparing themselves. Girls served as apprentices to their mothers, sisters, grandmothers, and aunts, just as boys served as apprentices to their fathers, brothers, grandfathers and uncles. Women acted as trainers, organizers, and overseers of girls of all ages as well as of young boys. Acting in a supervisory position, adult women initiated children into the complexities of food processing, soap making, candle making, spinning and weaving, knitting, and other domestic jobs. Girls and boys both participated in these endeavors, but as they grew older girls assumed more of the indoor chores and boys more of the outdoor tasks (at which point adult males took over their supervision, usually around age ten or twelve). Typically, girls continued to produce food, soap, and candles, and took on the additional responsibility of caring for the younger children. Boys, on the other hand, fetched fuel and water, assisted with planting and harvesting, and helped with the stock. Such divisions of labor were not always absolute, however, and in times of need a girl might haul fuel and herd cows, or a boy might be called upon to help make soap or candles.

The use of children as laborers indicates their economic importance within the family and explains why many families were unwilling to part with their children until they were in



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their twenties. Despite the stereotype of very early marriage on the frontier, in early agrarian Iowa children often remained on the family farm until age twenty or twenty-one, or even later. In one typical Iowa family of the period, the eldest son was still at home at age twenty, acting as the overseer of the younger boys and serving as his father's assistant; the eldest girl, aged twenty-two, oversaw the younger girls and assisted her mother. Certainly it was to the family's advantage to retain their children's services, but it was also to a young person's benefit to gain solid experience and skills within that family unit.

**T**HE SALIENT FEATURES of this interdependent farm family changed only slightly as time passed. But as Iowa rapidly "settled-up," developed, and even began to urbanize during the 1830s and 1840s, aspects of farm society certainly changed. Isolation lessened as neighbors, roads, and towns appeared in a region. Newspapers, magazines, and traveling shows also

provided increased outside stimulation, information, and diversion. At the same time, merchants, shops, and light industry began to supply "eastern-style" goods to the grateful settlers. As a rule of thumb, within two years of the initial settlement of any given area, neighbors and store-bought goods began to appear.

During the 1830s, isolated pioneer homemakers faced huge difficulties in obtaining such staples as sugar, salt, and spices. They relied upon herbs from their own gardens for seasonings, used honey and maple syrup in place of sugar, and often did without salt in their diet. But, as settlement progressed and towns appeared, their problems lessened. Sugar, salt, and spices became available from local merchants. In addition, sparse kitchenware was supplemented by "bought" tinware, pewter, and iron pots and pans. A stove boasting a new-fangled warming oven soon replaced the open fireplace. And a treadle-powered sewing machine usurped the place of honor once held by the spinning wheel.

Yet these changes did not bring a revolution in work loads or family structure. Women now

found themselves producing food for social events with the new neighbors. They were expected to welcome all travelers, migrants, and itinerant preachers whether they be friends or strangers. One historian of early Iowa observed that hospitality "was often so general as to impose a serious burden upon the woman as its dispenser." While most women seemed to enjoy the company, it certainly did nothing to lighten one's domestic load. Nor did technology change her roles and duties. The availability of store-bought foodstuffs meant that a woman was able and expected to provide more elaborate dishes and meals. Pewter and iron utensils had to be scoured and scrubbed with sand at least once a week. A stove required that its fire be fed and stoked and that its resplendant outside be kept that way by regular polishing. A sewing machine led to more complicated fashions including tucks, ruffles, and pleats, and its presence in the neighborhood encouraged friends and relatives to expect technical assistance with their own sewing chores. And the new technology was expensive. By the 1850s, the first sewing machines to appear in Iowa cost as much as \$40 to \$110. Farm families were discovering that moving into the profit column in anything more than a small way was going to take many years.

Farm men experienced change in a similar manner. Neighbors were a welcome source of company and additional labor but expected that same labor in return — or more, because they were just getting started. Seed and feed were becoming available but necessitated trips to town and a conveyance with which to carry them. Planters, threshers, and other machines could be rented or purchased but needed more than one person to operate them. Like domestic technology, field technology was expensive: by the 1850s the latest reaping machine cost upwards of \$155.

By the time that Iowa achieved statehood in 1846, "progress" had already transformed many of its raw frontier regions into bustling, settled areas. River towns on the Mississippi and Missouri particularly burst forth with merchants of all description, saloons, hotels, opera houses, newspapers, and burgeoning populations. Of course, more remote sections of Iowa

remained "frontier" in their orientation until the coming of the railroads in the 1860s and 1870s. For example, in 1856, ten years after statehood, Mary Ellis of Dickinson County recorded making a meal of "punkin flap jacks" and a few slices of venison. "We don't have anything but 'taters' and punkin here," she grumbled. And as late as 1869, a newly arrived family of settlers in Clay County existed for an entire winter on "sod house soup," composed of chunks of meat cut off a "half-of-beef" and mixed with a meager supply of vegetables. A year later, in 1870, the United States Census Bureau declared the Iowa frontier "closed" by virtue of the state having an average of 21.5 people per square mile.

Clearly, Iowa had grown very rapidly. Settlers had streamed in by the thousands during the 1830s. As a result, by 1840 Iowa's population was 43,000. By 1850 it had shot up to 192,000; by 1860 to 675,000; by 1870 to 1,194,000. Times had indeed changed, but the basic structure of the farm family remained essentially the same up to and beyond 1870. The economic partnership that had been so crucial in settling the Iowa frontier would continue to contribute greatly to the subsequent development of the state. □

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

A rich and fascinating mine of information is found in the diaries, daybooks, letters, reminiscences, and memoirs of early settlers in Iowa. These can be found in the University of Iowa Libraries Special Collections (Iowa City), and in the State Historical Society of Iowa-Special Collections (Iowa City and Des Moines). A considerable number of pioneers' writings are available in *The Annals of Iowa*, *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, and *The Palimpsest*. Two that were drawn upon here are Glenda Riley, ed., "Pioneer Migration: The Diary of Mary Alice Shutes," Parts I and II, *Annals of Iowa*, 43, 7 (Winter 1977), 487-514, and 43, 8 (Spring 1977), 567-92; and "Family Life on the Frontier: The Diary of Kitturah Penton Belknap," *Annals of Iowa*, 44, 1 (Summer 1977), 31-51. Also of interest by Riley is "'Not Gainfully Employed': Women on the Iowa Frontier, 1833-1870," *Pacific Historical Review*, 49, 2 (May 1980), 237-64, and *Frontierswomen: The Iowa Experience* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1981), which received a Distinguished Service Award from the State Historical Society in 1983. Other useful secondary works are Ruth A. Gallaher, *Legal and Political Status of Women in Iowa, 1838-1918* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1918); Louise R. Noun, *Strong-Minded Women: The Emergence of the Woman Suffrage Movement in Iowa* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1969); and *The Invisible Farmers: Women in Agricultural Production* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983).