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Women Pioneers in Iowa

by Glenda Riley

In a 1922 address to the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, George F. Parker, an historian of the American West, boldly declared,

I define the American Pioneer as the man who . . . crossed the mountains from the thin line of Atlantic settlement. . . . I mean the man who . . . swept on through passes This man steadily solidified his settlement. . . . To me, this man reflects the character of the most effective single human movement in history.

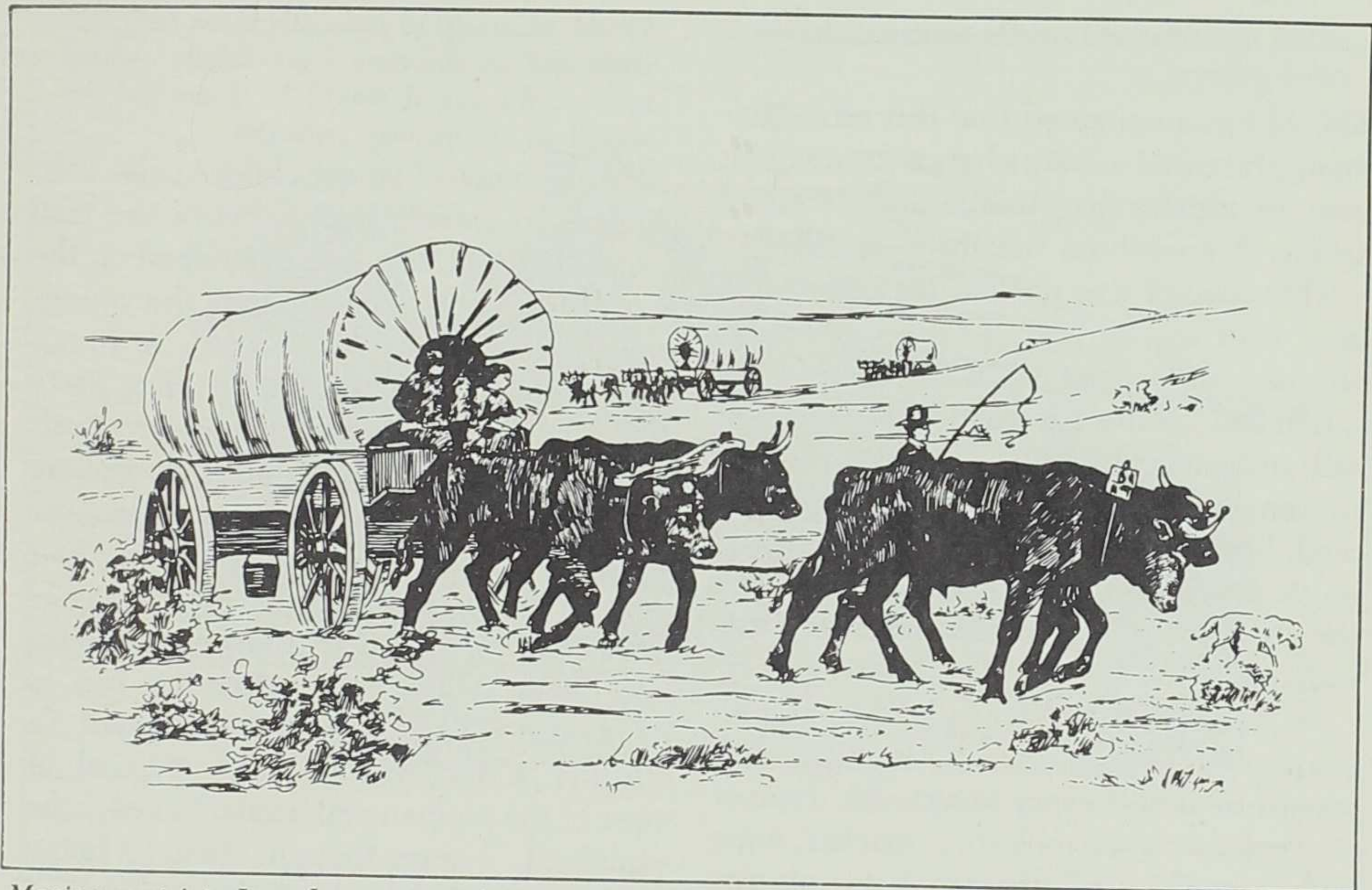
It is remarkable that no one—man nor woman—challenged this definition and asked where the American pioneer woman fit into the picture. It is even more remarkable that few historians since have asked many questions about the frontier women who crossed the mountains and swept through the passes along with the frontier men. Because pioneer women were largely “invisible,” a student of American history might assume that their contributions were secondary and not worthy of intense study. All that their invisibility proves, however, is that they did not hold high public office, command troops, build railroads, act as vigilantes, or rob stages.

Most pioneer women worked quietly behind the scenes, or more specifically, within the confines of their own cabins or sod huts. Because they worked hard and long, often 14 to 16 hours a day, they did not have much leisure time to record their thoughts and activities in diaries or jour-

nals which would have insured them a place in the eyes of later historians. But pioneer women did leave millions of artifacts in the form of personal and household items which offer mute evidence of pioneer life, and some of the frontier women found time to write diaries, letters, and memoirs which are gradually being collected and transcribed.

Some of these source materials are now being recognized and explored in Iowa. The result is the emergence of a fascinating picture of the lives of Iowa's pioneer women.

The first white woman to settle in Iowa was probably Maria Stillwell, wife of Moses Stillwell, who came to the Half-Breed Tract near Keokuk in 1828. The following year Hannah Galland, wife of Dr. Isaac Galland, moved into the same area and shortly thereafter gave birth to a daughter who is remembered as the first white child to be born in Iowa. It was not until 1833, when the Black Hawk Purchase Treaty provided for the removal of the Sauks and Mesquakies from part of eastern Iowa, that the territory was opened for settlement, and it was the mid-1830s before migration began to reach significant levels. Since the “new purchase” in Iowa was composed mainly of farm land, it was attractive to family units, and women were therefore a major part of Iowa's population



Moving west into Iowa by wagon and oxen (from H. Bonebright-Closz, *Reminiscences of Newcastle, Iowa* 1848).

from the beginning of settlement. Women who moved to Iowa had many reasons for believing it was the best place to establish a new home: the hope of restored health in Iowa's favorable climate, the opportunity to recoup a financial disaster sustained by the family, or the promise of a more prosperous future on Iowa's inexpensive and available farm lands.

Iowa also appeared promising to unmarried women who found the ratio of women to men definitely in their favor. In 1838, the Territorial Census recorded that there were four men to every three women and during the following decades the imbalance increased. In 1855, the *Davenport Courier* noted that, "At Fort Des Moines, Iowa, there is a dreadful scarcity of women." According to the *Courier*, "It isn't much better in Davenport than at Fort

Des Moines and we are sure it would be an act of humanity if scores of the young maidens who are pining away in the eastern villages for somebody to love would set their faces at once toward Iowa."

The advertising sections of the early newspapers attest to the fact that Eastern women were aware of the matrimonial possibilities existing in Iowa. In 1860, one Eastern woman placed this advertisement in the *Waterloo Courier*:

A young lady . . . in Central New York, is desirous of opening a correspondence with some young man in the West with a view to a matrimonial engagement. . . . She is about 24 years of age, possesses a good moral character, is not what would be called handsome, has a good disposition, enjoys good health, is tolerably well-educated, and thoroughly versed in the mysteries of house-keeping. . . . None but young men of good

moral character and strictly temperate habits need address.

The editor commented that this advertisement presented a "rare chance for a young man to obtain that useful and essential article of household furniture—a Wife."

This remark was not too far out of line in at least one respect: a wife *was* necessary on a farm frontier. In his widely-read *A Glimpse of Iowa in 1846*, John B. Newhall unequivocally said, "Married persons are generally more comfortable, and succeed better, in a frontier country, than single men; for a wife and family . . . may always prove a source of pecuniary advantage."

So hundreds of women migrated into Iowa with their husbands, families, and friends in almost every imaginable type of conveyance. Some took stagecoaches, some took the rail "cars," others took steamboats, and many combined several ways of travel in their westward journey. But by far the greatest number came in Conestoga wagons pulled by oxen and capable of traveling 18 to 23 miles on a good day. Once on the trail the women continued their household tasks and the care of their families in the face of severely limited resources. They camped out at night, cooked their food over open fires, and stopped to wash clothes when they happened upon a well or a stream.

Some women worked diligently to create a homelike aura around their family's wagon. One woman's description of her "salt rising" bread method demonstrated both ingenuity and determination:

When we camped I made rising and set it on the warm ground and it would be up about midnight. I'd get up and put it to sponge and in the morning the first thing I did was to mix the dough and put it in the oven and by the time we had breakfast it

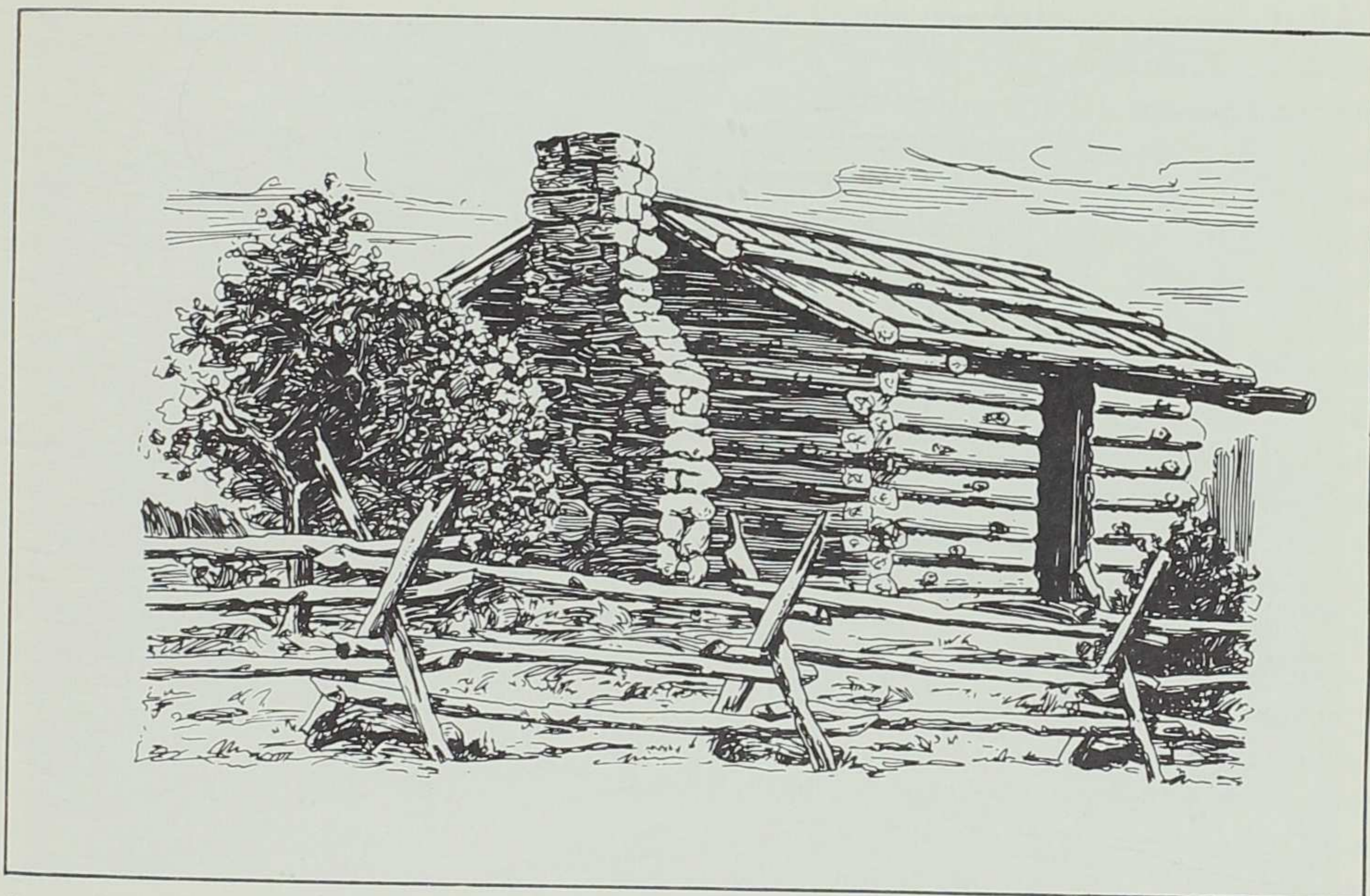
would be ready to bake; then we had nice coals and by the time I got things washed up . . . the bread would be done and we would go on our way rejoicing.

The presence of young children also contributed to a feeling of home in the trail camps. In 1846, one family camped on the way to Iowa with four children, the youngest of which was one year old. A young woman member of a similar traveling party in 1869 recalled that, "It was a great adventure. At night we camped out, cooking our meals by a camp fire." Not all pioneer women had such fond memories of their trek into Iowa, however, because many of them had to deal with illness, accidents, and death. Many years after her trip to Iowa, one former emigrant expressed an attitude which was probably typical of most of the women emigrants. "Then," she explained, "I never thought about its being hard. I was used to things being hard."

The determination and heroism of women were so common as to not seem particularly remarkable at the time. A case in point is the woman traveling with four small children to join her husband waiting in Iowa, who found herself stymied at the Mississippi River because the break-up of the winter ice made it impossible for teams to cross. Since she had no money for lodging until ferries could run, she distributed the luggage between the three oldest children, picked up the baby, and walked over



A frying pan designed for use over a campfire (from Cloz).



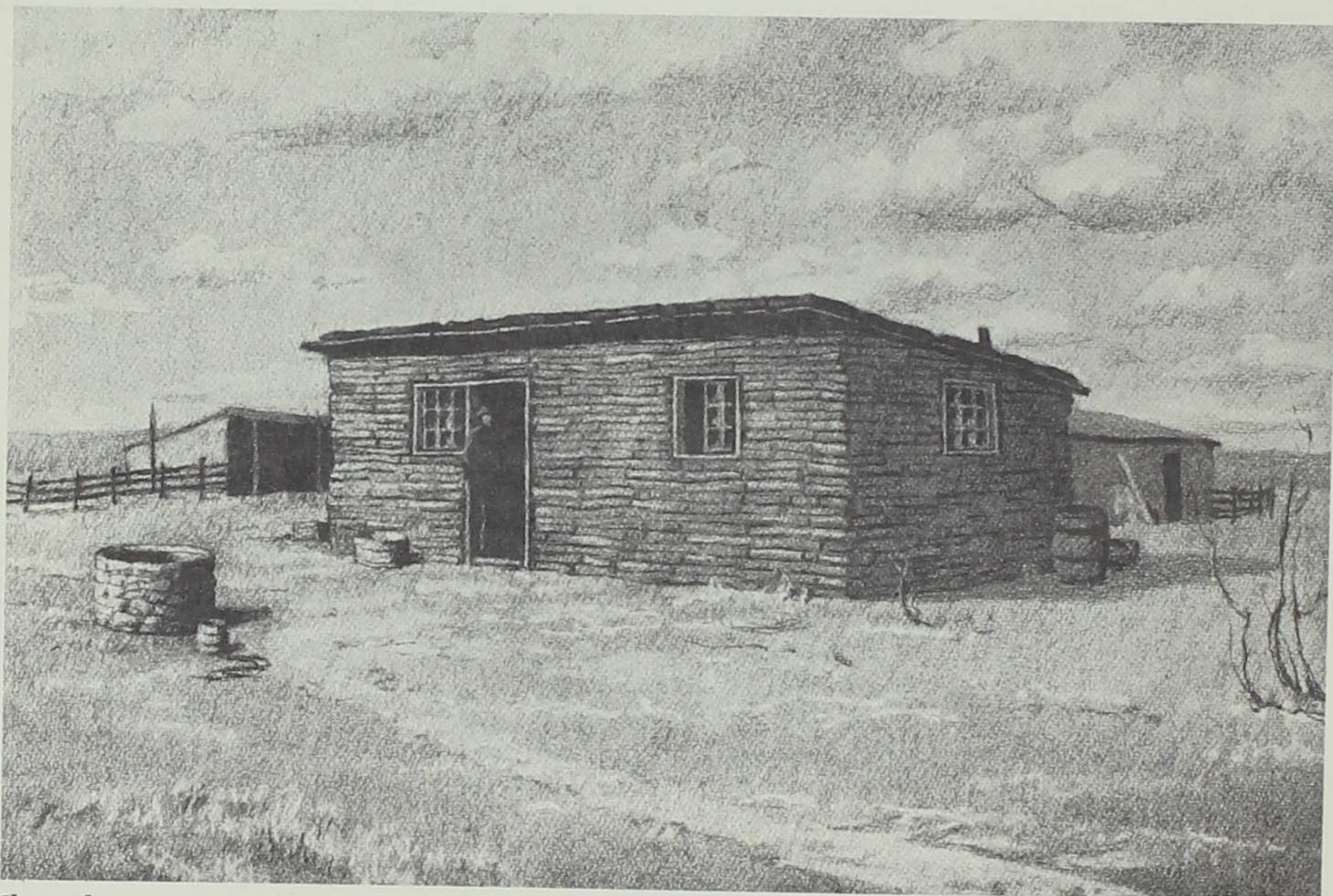
Log cabins were common in Iowa during the earliest days of settlement, despite the relative lack of timber. Many of these homes have survived until the present day, and many are preserved as relics of a bygone era (from Cloz).

the groaning ice. In later years, one of her children recounted memories of the seemingly interminable distance across the Mississippi and the thundering sound of ice splitting beneath their feet. This was a dramatic, but probably not an unfitting introduction to a country that would place heavy demands on these first homemakers.

When they finally arrived in Iowa the pioneer women were not always pleased with what they found. One wrote that, "When we got to the new purchase, the land of milk and honey, we were disappointed and homesick, but we were there and had to make the best of it." Another voiced bitter complaints about hostile Indians, cold winters, wet springs, hot summers, mosquitoes, and "wild beasts." But just as the men tackled the necessary busi-

ness of getting the land "broke" the women did what they could to devise homes for their families.

In Iowa, a pioneer home was generally either a rough-hewn log cabin in the timbered areas or a sod shanty in the prairie regions. For the most part, pioneer women's diaries do not present these early cabins and shanties in the same romantic vein that the modern media often does. One young woman, married in 1857, set up housekeeping in an abandoned corn crib which she made livable by covering the slats with blankets to keep the dirt and weather out. By 1861, her first child was born in what she regarded as a "real" home, a one-room log cabin. In 1869, when the family moved again, she and her chil-



When there was insufficient timber, pioneers turned to the earth itself for building material. Sod houses were not so common in Iowa as in other parts of the West, but there were many such dwellings in the more treeless parts of the state (drawing by Edith Bell).

dren dug out the earthen cellar for the new cabin. Another woman remembered living in a shanty of poles covered with elm bark without a fireplace or a door. She discovered with dismay that the shanty did not keep out the wildlife, and her first task every morning was to kill two or three snakes which had invaded her home.

In addition to animal invasion, weather conditions posed a constant challenge to women trying to create comfortable homes for their families. One pioneer lamented the continual frost on the wall above the bed in her sod shanty, another remarked on the snow on the blankets and table which drifted through the cracks in the cabin during the night, and another described shoveling snow out of the inadequately-roofed loft to prevent water from dripping on the occupants of the room be-

low. In 1856, Mary Kenyon wrote to her family in the East with tales about a winter so severe that floors became ice when mopped and tables froze during dishwashing. She added that, "Mr. Barnard froze his great toe one night when it happened to get out of bed when he was asleep."

Apparently their first homes on the prairies were a traumatic rather than a joyful experience for many women. Mary Elizabeth Lyon, recalling her family's arrival at their first cabin in 1854 wrote,

The log cabin was utterly desolate, and it gave ample evidence of having been used as a stable, rather than a human dwelling place. Small wonder that my mother, remembering the pretty little house back in Ohio, sat down and wept.

No doubt many tears were shed, but also many energies were spent in solving the



A saucer lamp (from Closz).

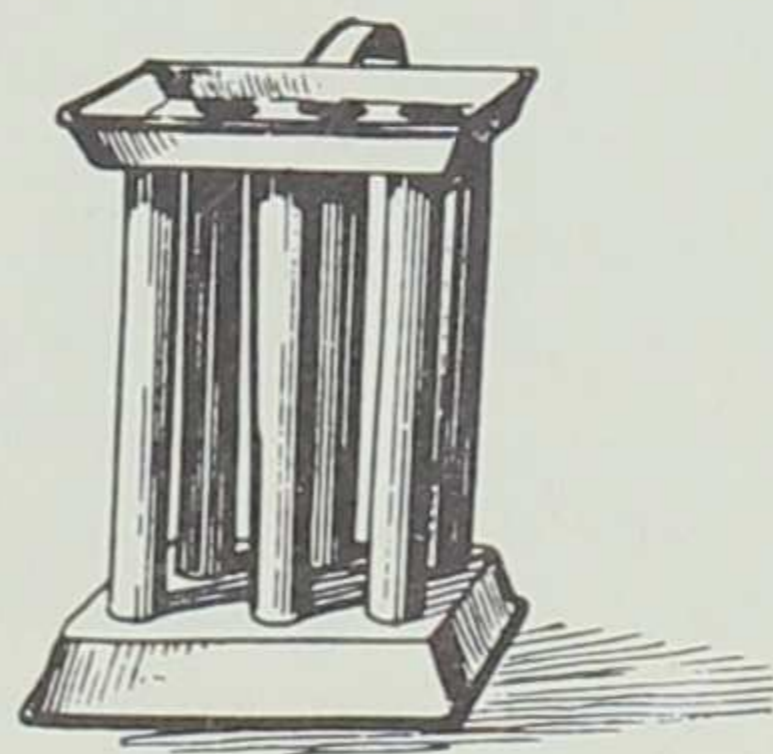
problems presented by a pioneer home which was typically one-room, 16 by 18 feet, with floors of packed dirt or rough-hewn puncheons. Women hung quilts and calico curtains to serve as room dividers, papered the walls with newspapers and magazine pictures or "painted" them with lime, wiped up the eternal dust and grime with wet paper or damp tea leaves, and swept or mopped the floors with discarded wash water. Yet despite the apparent difficulties of housekeeping under these conditions, the latchstring was always out for travelers in need of lodging. One pioneer woman claimed that her 16 by 18 foot cabin sheltered as many as 32 people on some nights while another boasted that her home could provide for as many people as there were puncheons in the floor for them to lie upon.

Many pioneer women were also justifiably proud of their ability to create household furnishings from the meager materials provided by a wilderness society. Bedding was kept fresh by periodically restuffing bed ticks with hay, prairie grass, or corn husks. Pioneer beds, made with springs of taut rope, ticking, a quilt pieced by hand on a large frame, and perhaps a top cover of animal fur, were warm—even though the ticks or lice they harbored were not always conducive to uninterrupted sleep.

Light was supplied by handmade candles, either tallow dips or molded candles,

if the family was fortunate enough to own an iron mold. Since candle-making required so much labor, candles were often conserved while the family used a saucer lamp, literally a small saucer with grease and a twisted piece of rag in it, for their light. Sometimes even these basic lighting facilities were not feasible, and in at least one family the children later reminisced about the many years during which their mother did all of the family sewing by the light of the fireplace alone. Soap was also produced by hand, usually in the spring of the year with all the children sharing in the work. Lye was leached from ashes saved from the winter's fires and was combined with grease conserved from cooking and butchering. After the ingredients were boiled in a huge kettle over an open fire in the yard, squares of "soft soap" were formed, wrapped in hay, and stored in the cellar next to the candles for use during the coming year.

At least there were always plenty of hands to help with these unending household chores, since large families with as many as 18 children were not uncommon on the frontier. Because children were considered economic producers in a farm economy, it is not difficult to understand why so much of the labor was assigned to them. In Ellen Strang's girlhood diary, her



A candle mold (from Closz).



Dipping candles was a difficult and expensive task, but afforded frontier families with the best available form of illumination (from Benj. Butterworth, The Growth of Industrial Art).

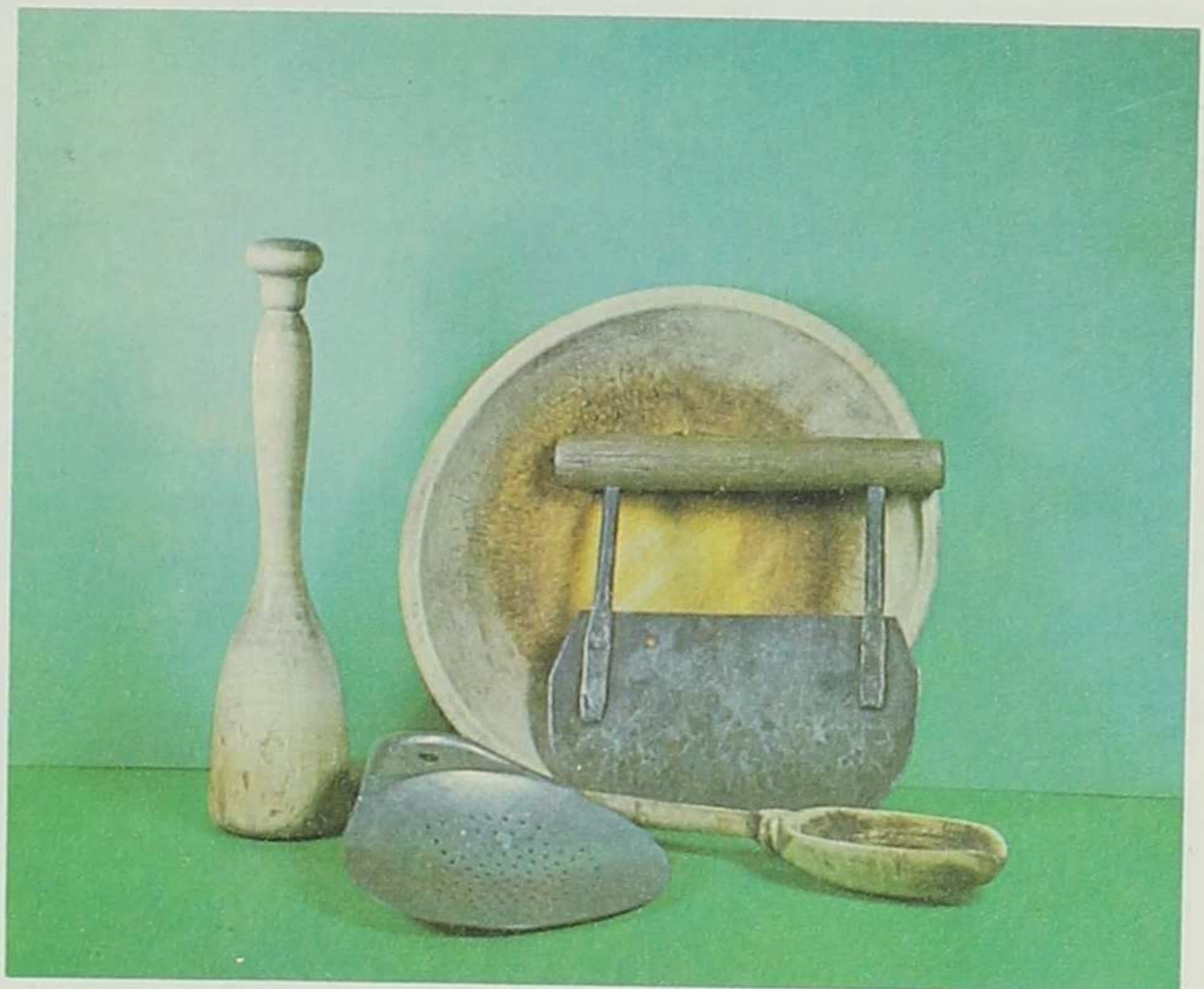
entries soon exhaust the reader with accounts of sewing, mopping, cleaning hog heads and feet, washing, ironing, dipping candles, papering bedroom partitions, and caring for sick children. George Duffield described a simple and efficient division of labor in his family during his childhood: his eldest sister Maria acted as the overseer of the younger girls in the family while his brother John, as the eldest boy in the family, served as the overseer of his younger brothers. In his opinion, the

Marias and Johns of the frontier never got their due credit.

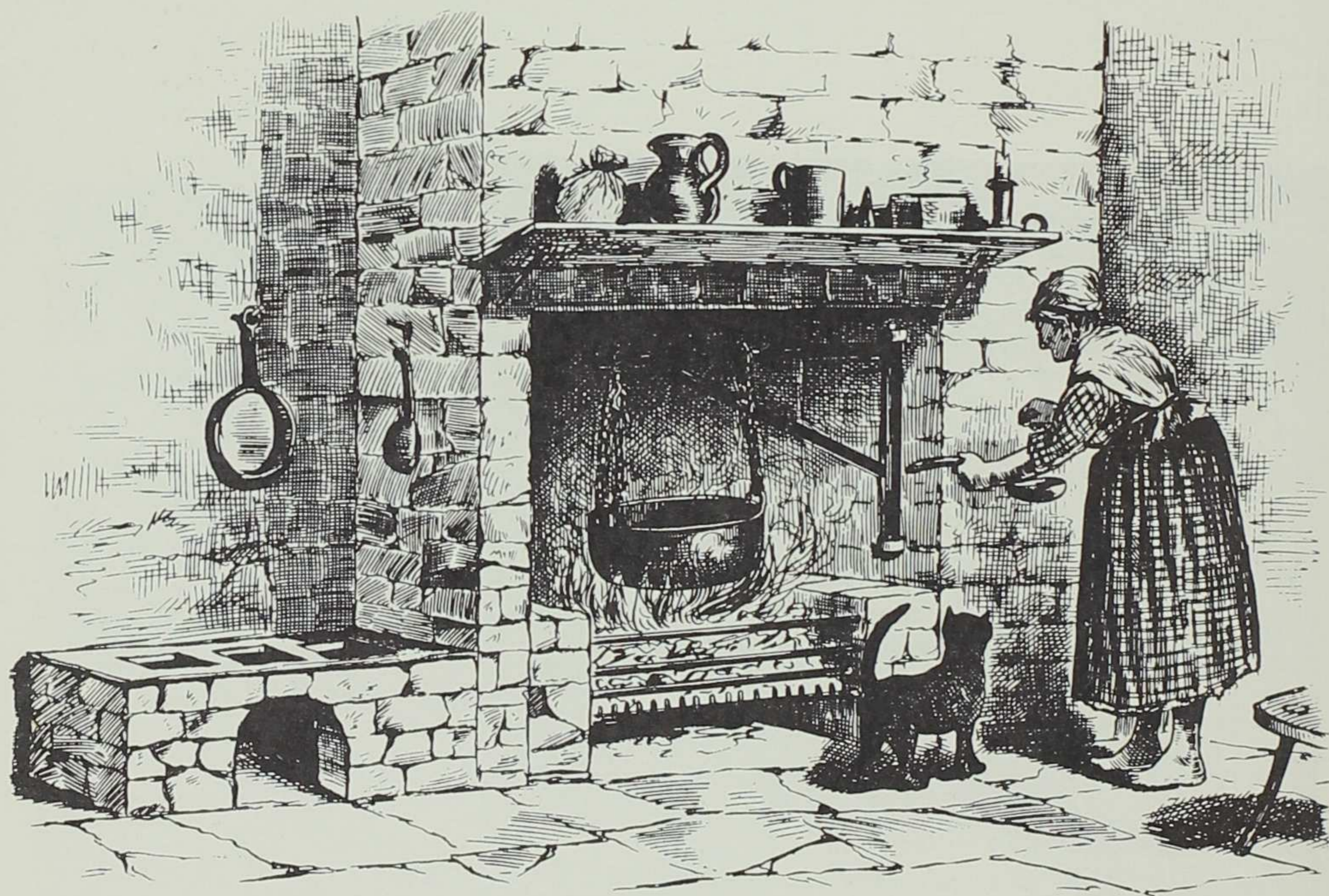
Despite help from the children, the heaviest duty—the cooking and processing of food—still fell to the mother of the family. In an era when people worked from dawn to dusk and consumed as many as 6000 calories a day due to the heavy labor required of them, food production had to be at the hub of all family activities. Because food was so important to family health and survival, a woman's worth was



A candle mold, candle stick, and candle lantern (University of Northern Iowa Museum).



Artifacts of frontier life—a potato masher, strainer, wooden spoon, chopper, and bowl—all used in typical pioneer homes in the never-ending preparation of food (University of Northern Iowa Museum).



Even though this view shows a fancier fireplace than those found in most pioneer homes, the cooking technique is the same (from Butterworth).

judged by her skill as a cook. Since cook-books were rudimentary, recipes were passed along by word-of-mouth and based on quantities of a pinch and a handful; with such directions it was not easy to gain a local reputation as a good cook.

Primitive cooking facilities certainly did not ease matters any for pioneer cooks. Women usually cooked in an open fireplace with one basic utensil—an iron kettle on a swinging crane. They also became skillful with a covered iron bake-pan buried in the hot coals, used to roast chicken, fry venison, broil squirrel, and even to bake corn-dodger cakes. Most noteworthy of all was the ability to bake bread in an open fireplace. A johnny-cake board was spread with corn dough, propped up to

face the fire, and turned until the bread was nicely browned.

The proficiency of these early cooks was demonstrated by a young bride who was called upon to prepare a Christmas dinner for 12 people. Her menu, or “bill of fare” as she called it, would tax the dexterity of a modern cook equipped with modern appliances:

For bread, nice light rolls; cake, doughnuts; for pie, pumpkin; preserves, crab apples and wild plums; sauce, dried apples; meat first round: roast spare ribs with sausage and mashed potatoes and plain gravy; second round: chicken stewed with the best of gravy; chicken stuffed and roasted in the Dutch oven by the fire.

She was pleased when she gained a local reputation as a good cook because she

realized that "good cooking makes good friends." Another example of an adept cook was Sarah Nossaman who, with one other woman, cooked over an open fireplace for 45 men working on the construction of a mill. Her wages of 75¢ per week seemed generous to her and most welcome since the money allowed her to buy the first "store-bought" clothes she had ever owned.

Eventually cook-stoves of various designs made their way into Iowa. But in a prairie region wood for fuel was difficult to find, so a cook-stove was developed which efficiently burned twisted hay, slough grass, or prairie grass. It is ironic that this stove created yet another job for the women and children of the family who

had to spend long hours in the preparation of fuel by collecting and twisting the hay or grass.

Although the actual cooking of food consumed many hours, the never-ending processing of foodstuffs was even more taxing. Churning butter, drying fruit, digging "taters," pulling beans, and transforming Iowa corn into bread, pone, mush, and hominy were just a few of the hundreds of processing chores performed in each household. Since sugar was very expensive by pioneer standards, the women and children were constantly on the lookout for a bee tree which they might rob of its highly-prized honey. Another task was to "strip cane" and boil it down into molasses. This was considered such vital work that many fam-



Soapmaking (from Butterworth).

ilies kept their children home from the first weeks of school as enforced laborers, perhaps an understandable practice when molasses was selling for 40¢ to 85¢ a gallon during the decade preceding the Civil War.

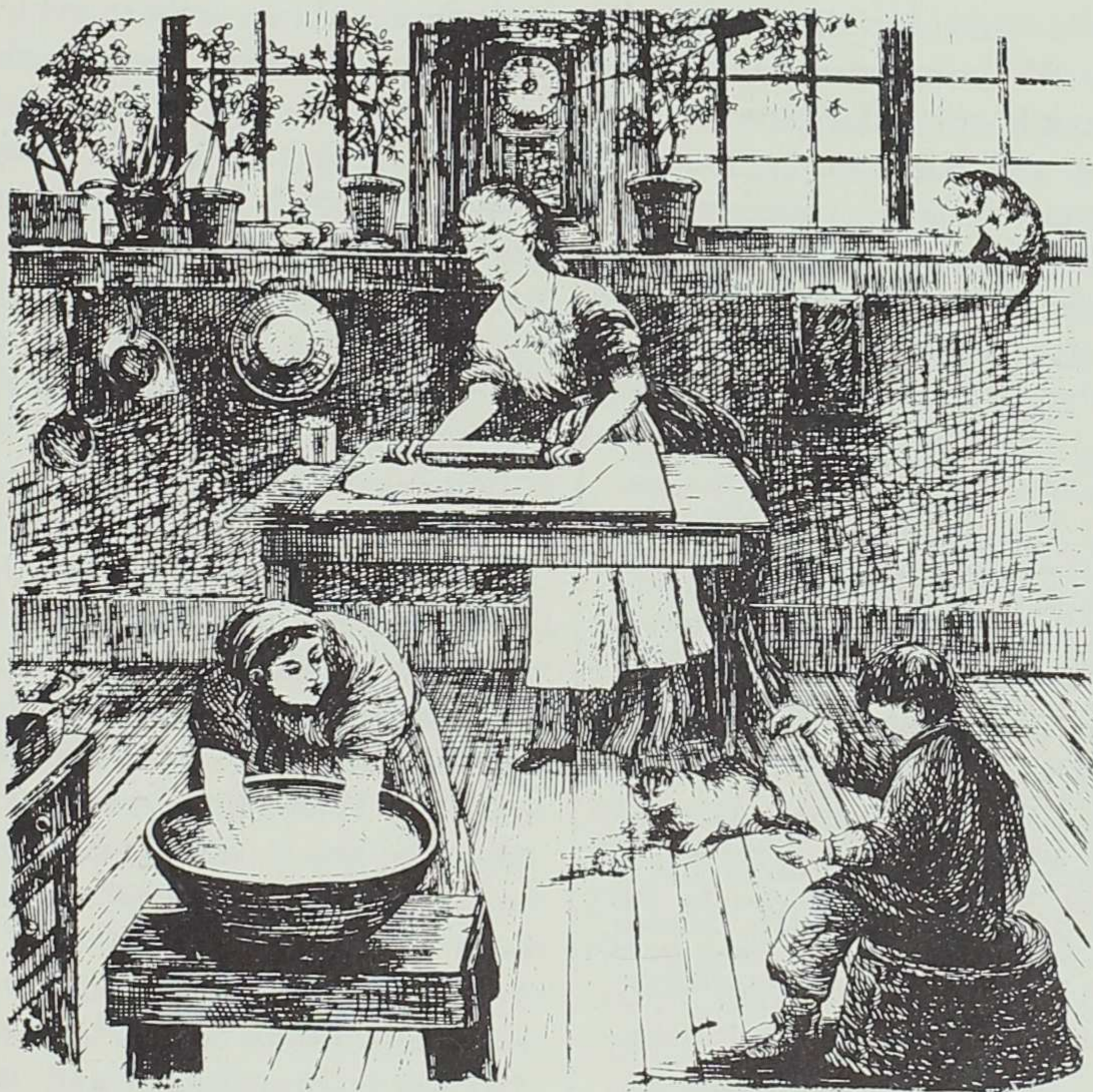
Skill in the processing of herbs was almost as essential as skill in the processing of food. Since medical practitioners were not plentiful on the frontier, women often served as apothecaries, doctors, nurses, and morticians—all arts requiring competence in the use of herbs. The herbs were gathered in wooded areas (at the risk of meeting with a rattlesnake) or grown in kitchen gardens, dried, and then brewed into medicinal teas, tonics, or prepared as poultices. Herbs, especially asafetida, were tied in small bags around children's necks as preventive medicine. And herbs were employed in the unhappy, but necessary, duty of laying out the dead.

The importance of herb knowledge is shown in the early receipt (recipe) books which usually included as many recipes for herb medicines as they did for food. This is not to say that the pioneers did not use other types of medicines when they could be obtained. Quinine was a treatment used by some pioneers for almost any medical problem, while whisky, as one frontier woman stated, "was the chief reliance for snake bites—and for a great many other things." When doctors were available they were often prevailed upon to ride many miles to treat the ill. Clara Dodge wrote to tell her husband Augustus in 1841 about her treatment for fever by the doctor who "on arriving bled me and

then gave me Calomel and other medicines."

Ellen Strang's diary gives an unusually good picture of medical care in the 1860s in Iowa. In the treatment of her baby sister for "chills and fever" she used quinine measured out on the point of a pen knife, Jamaica Ginger tea to create a "sweat," whisky rubbed on the baby's limbs, mustard water to soak her hands and feet, and sulphur bound on the joints of her hands and feet. Similarly, Mary Kenyon treated her husband's cold with doses of morphine as well as "put the physic and hoar hound tea to him nice and kept him on water porridge the next day." Of course, these home remedies were augmented by patent medicines; during the Civil War era, for example, Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup at 25¢ per vial was a widespread remedy for the treatment of toothache.

In between the unflagging demands placed upon her by child-care, the production of household goods, the cooking and processing of food, the preparation of medicines, and the care of the sick, the pioneer woman made time to manufacture most or all of the clothing worn by her family. In the early years, commercially-produced yard goods were not available, so the long process of clothing production literally had to begin with the sheep. In the spring of 1839, one frontier woman was thinking ahead to clothing for the coming year when she said, "now the wool must be taken from the sheep's back, washed and picked and sent to the carding machine and made into rolls, then spun, colored and wove ready for the next winter." To prepare



the wool for the machine she invited in 12 "nice old ladies" to help her pick and sort "25 fleeces" in one day's time. When the wool "came home" from the machine, she started spinning her stocking yarn. "Can spin two skeins a day," she wrote, "and in the evening will double and twist it while George reads the history of the U.S."

Some of this tedious labor was alleviated when gingham and calico were marketed during the 1840s and 1850s. Sewing machines further lightened the tremendous task of clothing a family. In 1856, the first Singer sewing machine in Decorah drew

in neighbors from miles around just to view this curiosity. And in the 1860s, Alice Money, a young girl who did all the sewing for her family—including muslin undergarments with ruffles and tucks, dresses with ruffles, tucks, and bias bindings, and shirts and suits—treadled hundreds of miles on an early model of a Wheeler and Wilson sewing machine.

Most Iowa frontier women were determined not to let themselves become dowdy by Eastern ideals so they diligently followed the fashions of the day. Hoop skirts became standard equipment for all wom-

en, even little girls, by the 1850s and 1860s. Agnes Wilson commented that "to be seen without hoops endangered a woman's standing and she was liable to be called eccentric." This was apparently a very serious issue for more than one woman suffered singed dresses when her hoops carried her skirts into an open fireplace.

Note on Sources

Diaries, letters, and reminiscences of pioneer women in Iowa provided most of the information presented in this article. Many of these source materials are readily available in *Annals of Iowa*, *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, and *The Palimpsest*. Some of the most useful are Lida L. Greene (ed.), "Diary of a Young Girl," *Annals of Iowa*, 36 (Fall 1962), 437-459; Alice Money Lawrence, "A Pioneer School Teacher in Central Iowa," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, 33 (October 1935), 376-395; and Sarah Welch Nossaman, "Pioneering at Bonaparte and Near Pella," *Annals of Iowa*, 13 (October 1922), 441-453.

In addition, there are some women's source materials in The University of Iowa Libraries Special Collections in Iowa City, the Division of the Historical Museum and Archives in Des Moines, and the Division of the State Historical Society of Iowa in Iowa City. The author would like to thank the librarians of all three collections for their cooperation and patience. Joyce Giacquinta, Manuscript Librarian at the State Historical Society, was particularly helpful, especially in creating a separate catalog of women's documents.

Secondary works on Iowa's pioneer women are sparse. Ruth A. Gallaher, *Legal and Political Status of Women in Iowa, 1838-1918* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1918) and Louise R. Noun, *Strong-Minded Women: The Emergence of the Woman-Suffrage Movement in Iowa* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1969) are useful regarding the political aspects of women's lives in Iowa. More general accounts of frontier women include the sentimentalized versions found in Dee Brown, *The Gentle Tamers: Women of the Old Wild West* (New York: Bantam Pathfind Edition, 1974); William W. Fowler, *Woman on the American Frontier* (New York: Source Books Press, 1970 reprint of 1879 edition); and Helena Huntington Smith, "Pioneers in Petticoats," *American Heritage*, 10 (February 1959), 36-39, 101-103. Two recent and more realistic studies are Johnny Farragher and Christine Stansell, "Women and Their Families on the Overland Trail to California and Oregon, 1842-1867," *Feminist Studies*, 2 (1975), 150-166, and T. A. Larson, "Women's Role in the American West," *Montana the Magazine of Western History*, 24 (Summer 1974), 2-11.

Hoops could be embarrassing as well as dangerous. A young country school teacher caught her hoops on a post while going over a stile and hung from the fence trapped in her own fashionable gear. When her beau tried to come to her rescue he caught his foot in the offending hoop and he too became entrapped. It was left to their friends to untangle them, much to everyone's discomfort.

Pioneer women continued to slavishly adopt fashionable fads such as the bustle, whalebone corsets, and heavily adorned dresses and bonnets in spite of the difficulty of adapting them to farm life. When the hoop skirt became unmanageable, women developed a weighted cord to hold it down. When the skirts and hoops became too heavy, women developed a skirt supporter consisting of straps crossing over their shoulders to hold them up. When the farm women could not afford elaborate outfits (which often consumed 100 yards of material and weighed as much as 15 pounds), they fashioned their calicos to emulate the fashion plates as nearly as possible.

Although many jokes were made at the expense of women's fashions, they were perhaps an attempt on the part of frontier women to maintain a semblance of civilization in a country that had stripped away all other luxuries. Some women recognized the problems that such clothing created. An Iowa woman, Amelia Bloomer, advocated and wore an outfit which combined a mid-calf length skirt with pantaloons-type trousers under it. The Bloomer outfit, as it was called after Amelia, was

unacceptable to most people, both men and women, because it was generally considered a disgrace for women to be seen wearing pants.

So instead of reform, more fashionable refinements were added as time went on. In 1871, an Iowa woman wrote that, "Hoops and great bustles are all the rage Almost every girl wears curls or frizzes. One day I was walking behind a very gay young lady when her curls fell off among her feet."

At the same time they were engaged in frivolous pursuits to relieve what was probably otherwise a rather drab life, Iowa women were also expressing interest in serious concerns, particularly in the improvement of their own educations. According to one young woman, to become a teacher was the highest ambition of an Iowa pioneer girl because it was a way to escape the drudgery of farm life. Women were never excluded from the teaching profession by law in Iowa as they were in some other states, so many women were successful in achieving their goal. Even before the Civil War over 50 percent of Iowa's teachers were women, an unusually high percentage for the time. Undoubtedly, a prosperous future on rich Iowa land was more appealing to most men than a teacher's unsteady periods of employment and small salary. Moreover, there probably was enough egalitarian frontier spirit prevailing in Iowa to allow women some mobility.

Certainly the financial rewards of teaching could not have had very great appeal

to women since the usual pay was \$2 a week and being "boarded 'round" with the pupils' families. Agnes Briggs had the misfortune to be boarded in a two-room cabin with a family living in each room. She boarded with the front-room family and after many unpalatable meals and overcrowded conditions she returned to her own family's home although it meant a walk of five miles to reach her school. In 1868, Alice Money received \$30 per month, relatively high pay for the time. Although barely 20 years old, she handled a school reputed to be rough because of all the "big boys" enrolled. When the biggest boy made an indecent remark to her she shoved him out of his desk into the aisle and spanked him with his own geography book. For the rest of the term, this 5'1", 100 pound woman faced no further disruptions in discipline, nor did her admiring students ever allow her to perform another school chore.

Clearly, teaching school was by no means an easy life even though it compared favorably to life on a frontier homestead. In 1867, one young teacher made a revealing entry in her diary:

Got up at quarter past four made the beds, picked up the clothes to wash, switched out and combed my hair. After breakfast worked at sundries. Got to school in good season scholars all there before 9 o'clock.

The pioneer teacher's curriculum was varied, uneven and at times even chaotic. Pupils brought whatever school books their families owned and the teacher proceeded to plan instruction on the basis of the books offered to her that term. Additional



Fashion plates (here and below) from the popular magazine Godey's Lady's Book in the 1840s and 1850s. Such pictures fired the style consciousness of frontier women.



confusion was introduced by the division of the school year into two separate sessions, summer and winter, quite often with a new teacher and a new group of students in any given school each term.

In most schools the equipment was rudimentary—long benches served as seats and a slanting shelf attached to the wall took the place of desks. It was only the fortunate teacher who had a blackboard, a globe, or a map to work with. Yet, as Matilda Peitzke Paul said of her school experience in the 1860s, although there were definite limitations, “we all learned a little and had lots of fun.”

Despite being primitive by modern standards, these frontier schools must have stimulated and motivated many women because they reached out for improved educational opportunities wherever they existed. When colleges and seminaries were opened, women were willing to endure hardships for the privilege of attend-

ing even one term. A group of six young women traveled 40 miles in a lumber wagon to attend the winter term at Grinnell College (Iowa College), and one woman worked as a shepherd to earn tuition to Albion Seminary. When the first state university was founded in Iowa, the charter did not specifically bar women as students, but when several women enrolled they met short-lived resistance from the Trustees. In 1864, the Iowa General Assembly declared that the University would be coeducational, thus formalizing into law a long-standing custom in Iowa schools.

Even with the opportunities extended to women in frontier Iowa, many were lonely for their old homes and neighbors "back East." May Ramsay always carried childhood memories of her grandmother "who would curl up in her rocking chair and cry." More often than not, isolation was a commonplace of daily life. Regarding the 1850s, one woman bitterly commented that, "There were no large cities, no colleges, no railroads, no banks, no daily papers, no telegrams, no daily mails, very little money, and most of that of doubtful value." Another flatly stated that if a person liked seclusion "this is the place."

The solitude was relieved in part by letters from the East. In 1856, a lonely Iowa woman wrote her mother that "a letter from the East is of much importance to we poor exiles out here." In 1857, she begged her mother to write as often as possible because her letters were like "bread and 'lasses" to a hungry child. And in an 1860 epistle she not only confided to her mother that her husband carried a family letter with him all the time, but even speculated that when he got time to himself he read the letter and cried.



Pioneer families exerted themselves to keep up their end of the correspondence, but writing letters was difficult at best. Time had to be stolen from activities more crucial to survival, pens were inadequate, ink often had to be made at home, and paper was extremely expensive. Every space on a sheet of letter paper was utilized, sometimes by writing around the margins and sometimes by superimposing lines written vertically over lines already written horizontally, producing a peculiar "cross-writing" effect.

A completed letter was folded to form its own envelope in order to avoid any further weight or waste of paper. Once addressed, a letter might have to wait several days for someone to go the way of the nearest post office. When it could be arranged, trips were made to the post office just to see if any letters from the East had arrived, but since postage was paid on the receiver's end a pioneer family had to pay

A sample of a cross-written letter by Jane Robinson and her husband James of Iowa City. The message was to one of Jane's relatives in the East.

hard-to-come-by cash before they could take their letter home. In more than one instance, a woman spent several days selling butter and eggs to her neighbors so that she might redeem the precious letter waiting for her in the post office.

There were also occasional social events which eased the loneliness of frontier life. Like the pioneers who settled America's first frontier from Plymouth to Charleston, Iowans found that it was practical to combine work with fun whenever possible. Sewing bees, chopping parties, log-raisings, and especially harvesting and threshing days all created an opportunity to dispatch with a necessary piece of work while visiting with neighbors and indulging in bountiful meals.

The church supplied its share of diversion as well. Services provided an opportunity to interact with friends and neighbors, as did church socials and charity fairs. Weddings were followed by a bran dance (the feet of the dancers released oil from kernels of bran into the unseasoned wood floor of the couple's new home) or

by an informal and sometimes raucous shivaree (charivari). Sometimes camp meetings drew people from many miles around. In 1839, a family attended what they believed to be the first camp meeting west of the Mississippi, where they witnessed "twenty clear conversions . . . had a rest and have got strengthened both soul and body."

The local school served as another social center for pioneer families. Spelling bees involving students from two or more schools were matters of fierce competition and intense local pride. Often literary societies met in the schoolhouse, and frequently neighborhood dances were held there to the music of the town's fiddle player.

In addition, holidays were always a cause to set work aside for a day in favor of social activities. Christmas entailed large quantities and varieties of food, special treats such as candy or apples, and homemade or inexpensive "store-bought" presents. For many years Matilda Peitzke Paul treasured a Christmas present given

to her as a young girl—"a little tin pail about the size of a ½ pint cup . . . painted green, with the word Girl on it in yellow."

Not long after Christmas, frontier people began to anticipate the excitement and plan the celebrations of the Fourth of July. Towns took turns sponsoring the holiday events so it was not unusual to travel five or ten miles to participate in the festivities. Speakers, singers, horse-races, contests of strength, lemonade stands, and even a few firecrackers contributed to the spirit of the day. The only entertainment that could match the Fourth in thrills were the traveling circuses which reached Iowa in the late 1850s. With their tents, side shows, and exotic animals such as elephants, camels, bears, and monkeys, they were irresistible to children and adults alike.

Still, for the majority of pioneer women, social affairs were relatively infrequent, and seclusion had to be lived with and endured. Loneliness and fear became even more acute when the husband was gone from the home—sometimes for days at a time—to hunt, to trade furs, to buy supplies, to file a deed at the county seat, to serve in politics, to fight in a war, or for any one of innumerable other reasons. Clara Dodge felt so bereft and abandoned by her husband's repeated departures that she spent hours crying or days in bed. Another woman recalled being terrified when her husband was away hunting because she was left with only an ax and a dog for protection.

Fear of Indian uprisings, whether justified or not, intensified the pioneer woman's sense of isolation and apprehension. Stories abounded regarding women who had been carried off only to be later re-

jected by white society when they escaped their captors. The unfortunate incident of the Spirit Lake Massacre of 1857 received widespread publicity, especially from Abbie Gardner Sharp who at 14 witnessed all the cruel details of the attack upon her family as well as upon her neighbors and friends. In the early 1860s, the citizens of one small town became so panicked at the rumor of an attack that all women and children were sent away in a wagon train (although not one hostile Indian was ever sighted). Another town feared attack when several hundred Native Americans camped around their settlement at the same time that draft officials were rumored to arrive. According to one townsman, after a few days "the draft passed over and they departed." During the Civil War years, the wife of a Union doctor kept whisky spiked with morphine so in the event that tribesmen did encroach upon her household they could be drugged, giving the family a chance to escape.

Probably many of the fierce characteristics of Iowa tribes were imputed to them by pioneer women looking through eyes already jaundiced by other problems and anxieties. To the pioneer women, however, the fears of attack were very real and certainly did nothing to relieve what was already a psychologically-taxing style of life. In many cases, pioneer women saw no other white women for many months at a time. In 1836, Caroline Phelps remarked that it had been 11 months since she had seen a white woman, and in 1842 Mary Ann Ferrin, the first white woman to settle in Marshall County, noted that she lived there for "five months without seeing a white woman and not but a few white men." Yet pioneer women seldom dropped out, or broke down, or gave up. Most of

them seemed to persevere. As one said, "the drudgery was unending" and the "isolation was worse" but "we had bought the farm and there we were."

This realistic attitude probably accounts for the many cases on record of pioneer women undertaking essential tasks whether they were within their traditional domestic sphere or not. One woman drove a team of oxen to help her husband with plowing because there was "neither man nor boy that we could hire." Another helped her trader husband "pack the skins, as we had no man to help." One woman served as a station agent, several took up homesteads in their own names, and another wrote on political matters for her county newspaper. Mary Street chopped a cord of wood a day for sale to the steamboats while others reaped wheat, cut hay, stoned up wells, and lathed houses. When the Kenyons' hired man left just at "corn plucking" time, Mary wrote, "I shouldered my hoe and have worked out ever since I wore a dress with my sunbonnet wrung out in water every few minutes and my dress also wet, this was all the clothing Clara and I wore." Her comment to her family back East regarding her field experience had a typically pragmatic tone: "I guess my services are just as acceptable as his [the hired man] or will be in time to come to the country."

With this spirit of competence and practicality, women moved into professional areas, which had been long restricted by custom to men. Marion Murdock became a trained Unitarian minister with a pastorate in Humboldt, Iowa. Mary Spencer be-

came the first woman clerk of the Iowa legislature in 1870. J. Ellen Foster became a lawyer who, according to a friend, "mounted the stump and told the men how to vote, while they fairly held their breath at her audacity."

During the Civil War, Iowa women served their state and country through Soldiers' Aid Societies and Sanitary Commissions. Ann E. Harlan, wife of Senator James Harlan, was active in organizing Sanitary Fairs, in leading the Women's Sanitary Commission in Des Moines, and in initiating a military hospital for the Iowa wounded at Keokuk. Annie Turner Wittenmyer was notable for her service as the State Sanitary Agent from Iowa, for her establishment of a home for soldiers' orphans, and for her introduction of diet kitchens into military hospitals.

So even in pioneer Iowa, with all of its drudgery and hardships, there were plenty of what were disparagingly called "strong-minded" women. It was therefore not surprising that the question of women's rights eventually surfaced. A few scattered accounts regarding women speaking and lecturing on women's rights appeared in Iowa newspapers as early as 1854. At that same time, the first Iowa State Fair added a contest for "female equestrians" to their program due to public complaints by women. The first record of a major public debate on the question of women's rights can be traced to a lyceum held in Keokuk County only a few years later in 1858. In 1866, women's rights were mentioned in the journal of the Iowa legislature when there was some discussion of striking out

the word "male" in the Iowa state constitution. In 1868, suffrage clubs formed in Dubuque and Burlington and soon spread over Iowa. One group of women even published a suffrage paper titled *The Upper Des Moines*, and in 1870, the Iowa Equal Suffrage Association was founded, largely due to the concerted efforts of Amelia Bloomer.

In the decade of the 1870s, Iowa seemed to be progressing rapidly toward the adoption of woman suffrage. In 1870, both houses of the Iowa Legislature passed a woman suffrage amendment but reconsidered their decision in 1872. By 1880, women were allowed to vote on some school and public building appropriation issues, in anticipation of their being granted the general right to vote. It was not until 1916, however, that a formal suffrage amendment was offered to Iowa voters, and the issue was defeated. The women of Iowa had to wait until the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1920 to finally gain in law the voice that had long been granted to them in practice.

As the frontier passed in Iowa, the roles of women in society began to change. Freed from some of the most burdensome and pressing duties of pioneer life, women began to branch out into new areas of accomplishment, as witnessed by their participation in traditionally male activities during the Civil War. They bore the major burden in the suffrage reform movement and began to explore the possibilities of other legal and social freedoms. Even though these later activities are per-

haps more dramatic than the details of everyday life in the earliest years of Iowa settlement, the rich heritage of the Iowa pioneer women must not be overlooked. Women carried major responsibilities during the creation of this peaceful and prosperous state. In spite of the chronic underestimation of the role of women in early Iowa society—the 1870 Federal Census report dismissed women in Iowa as "not gainfully employed"—the true importance of women's contributions is just now being recognized. It is past time to redefine George Parker's definition of "frontierman" by adding "frontierswoman" to the lexicon of Iowa history. □