



AN OLD-TIME IOWA BREAKING-PLOW.

This cut gives a fair semblance of one of these ancient implements, though few in use in the fifties were as smoothly made. One in the Historical Museum has a wooden mould-board, a "lay" or "shear" from the anvil of the local blacksmith, with cow-torn handles. Mr. Coffin describes the old breaking-plow so accurately that the reader, with the aid of this engraving, will readily understand its parts and how it was operated.

## BREAKING PRAIRIE.

BY HON. L. S. COFFIN.

How few of our people who have been residents of Iowa during the last quarter of the last century, either by immigration or by birth, have any conception of the meaning of the expression, "breaking prairie!" The old prairie breaking-plow has disappeared from sight as completely as the elk and the buffalo. So true is this, that the authorities of our State Agricultural College have been hunting for one for the museum of that institution, as an object-lesson and a reminder to their students of the days and ways of early farm life on the prairies, of which they know very little or nothing.

Let us permit the old "breaking-plow" to stand in its wide furrow of 20 to 32 inches, a few minutes, while we digress far enough from our subject to wish it were possible that another object-lesson could be laid before the students of our grand institution of learning at Ames. That object-lesson, if my wish could be realized, would be an average 100-acre New England farm, as it was fifty to seventy years ago, and as it is to-day, with all its appliances, laid down there near the college farm. The young and middle-aged people of this State, who have been born in Iowa and live on its rockless, hilless, stumpless and matchless soil, have but little realizing sense of the incomparable advantages they have in being residents of such a State.

It is the custom with many of the graduates of our institutions of learning, to spend a year or more abroad. I could wish that the graduates from the agricultural course could go to some of the New England states and work a year or so on some of those farms. The benefit would be almost incalculable. But we cannot now take the time to explain how and why. To many of the farmers of Iowa, who were New England born, no explanation is needed.

But to return to the old prairie breaking-plow which we



left standing in the furrow. How shall I introduce the younger readers of *THE ANNALS OF IOWA* to it? I hope its editor may be able to secure a picture of a real *bona fide* old prairie breaking-plow.\* All attempts to present a word picture of it must fail to give any person who has never seen one a true idea of the real thing. These plows, as a rule, were very large. They were made to cut and turn a furrow from twenty to thirty inches wide and sometimes even wider. The beam was a straight stick of strong timber seven to twelve feet long. The forward end of this beam was carried by a pair of trucks or wheels, and into the top of the axle of these wheels were framed two stout, upright pieces just far enough apart to allow the forward end of the plow-beam to nicely fit in between them. To the forward end of the beam and on top of it, there was fastened by a link or clevis, a long lever, running between these stout standards in the axle of the trucks, and fastened to them by a strong bolt running through both standards and lever; this bolt, acting as a fulcrum for the lever, was in easy reach of the man having charge of the plow. By raising or depressing the rear end of this lever the depth of the furrow was gauged, and by depressing the lever low enough, the plow could be thrown entirely out of the ground. One of the wheels of the truck ran in the furrow and was from two to four inches larger than the one that ran on the sod. This, of course, was necessary so as to have an even level rest for the forward end of the plow-beam. The mould-boards of these plows were sometimes made of wood protected by narrow strips of steel or band-iron, and fastened to the mould-board. In some cases these mould-boards were made entirely of iron rods, which generally gave the best satisfaction. The share of these plows—"shear," as we western folks called it—had to be made of the very best steel so as to carry a keen edge. The original prairie sod was one web of small tough roots, and hence the necessity of a razor-

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\*The reader will observe that Farmer Coffin's request has received due attention.

like edge on the "shear" to secure good work and ease to the team.

And next, the "prairie-breaking" plow team? Who sees the like of it today? A string of from three to six yokes of oxen hitched to this long plow-beam, the driver clad in somewhat of a cowboy style, and armed with a whip, the handle of which resembled a long, slender fishing-rod, with a lash that when wielded by an expert was so severe that the oxen had learned to fear it as much as the New England oxen did the Yankee ox-goat with its brad.

The season for "breaking prairie" varied as the spring and summer were early or late, wet or dry. The best results were had by beginning to plow after the grass had a pretty good start, and quitting the work some time before it was ready for the scythe. The main object aimed at was to secure as complete a rotting of the sod as possible. To this end the plow was gauged to cut only one and one-half to two inches deep. Then, if the mould-board was so shaped as to "kink" the sod as it was turned over, all the better, as in the early days of "prairie-breaking" very little use was made of the ground the first year. The object was to have the land in as good a shape as possible for sowing wheat the following spring. A dry season, thin breaking, "kinky" furrows, and not too long breaking accomplished this, and made the putting in of wheat the following spring an easy task. But on the contrary, if broken too deeply, and the furrows laid flat and smooth, or in a wet season, or if broken too late, the job of seeding the wheat on tough sod was a hard and slow one.

The outfit for "prairie-breaking" was usually about as follows: three to six yokes of oxen, a covered wagon, a small kit of tools, and among these always a good assortment of files for sharpening the plow-share, a few cooking utensils, and sometimes a dog and pony. The oxen, when the day's work was done, were turned loose to feed on the grass. To one or more was attached a far-sounding bell, so as to betray



their whereabouts at all times. The pony and dog came in good play for company, and in gathering up the oxen when wanted. The season for breaking would average about two months. The price per acre for breaking varied from \$2.50 to \$4.50, as the man was boarded or as he "found himself." In latter years when it was learned that flax could be raised to good advantage on new breaking, and that it helped to rot the sod, the breaking season commenced much earlier.

Three yokes of good-sized oxen drawing a 24-inch plow, with two men to manage the work, would ordinarily break about two acres a day; five yokes with a 36-inch plow, requiring no more men to "run the machine," would break three acres a day. When the plow was kept running continuously, the "shear" had to be taken to the blacksmith as often as once a week to be drawn out thin, so that a keen knife-edge could be easily put on it with a file, by the men who managed the plow. If the team was going around an 80-acre tract of prairie, the "lay" or "shear" had to be filed after each round to do the best work. The skillful "breaker" tried to run his plow one and one-half inches deep and no deeper. This was for the purpose of splitting the sod across the mass of tough fibrous roots, which had lain undisturbed for uncounted years and had formed a network of interlaced sinews as difficult to cut as india rubber, where the prairie was inclined to be wet; and it was not easy to find an entire 80-acre tract that was not intersected with numerous "sloughs," across which the breaking-plow had to run. In many places the sod in these "sloughs" was so tough that it was with the greatest difficulty that the plow could be kept in the ground. If it ran out of the ground, this tough, leathery sod would flop back into the furrow as swiftly as the falling of a row of bricks set up on end, and the man and driver had to turn the long ribbon of tough sod over by hand—if they could not make a "balk." In the flat, wet prairie, it sometimes took from two to three years for the tough sod to

decompose sufficiently to produce a full crop. The plow had to be kept in perfect order to turn this kind of prairie sod over, and the "lay" had to have an edge as keen as a scythe to do good work. There were usually two "lays" or "shears" fitted to each plow, so that the team need not be idle while the boy with the mustang went often from five to eight miles to the nearest blacksmith to get a "lay" sharpened. Sometimes the oxen would stray off among the "barrens," or follow the course of some stream for miles and hide among the willows to take a vacation, and frequently they were not found until after two or three days of weary search by the men and boy, while the plow which ought to be earning six or nine dollars a day was lying idle on the great prairie.

There were men who equipped "a brigade" for breaking and carried on a thriving business from about the first day of May to the end of July.

When the rush of immigration began in the spring of 1854, there were not nearly enough breaking-teams in the country to supply the demand. In some cases the "new-comers" would consent to have a portion of their prairie farms broken up in April, and on this early breaking they would plant "sod corn." The process was simple; a man with an axe would follow the line of every second or third furrow, strike the blade deep in the ground, a boy or girl would follow and drop three or four kernels of corn into the hole and bring one foot down "right smart" on the hole in the sod, and the deed was done. No cultivation was required after planting, and in the fall a half crop of corn was frequently gathered without expense. Those who were not able to get breaking done at the best time for subduing the sod, were often glad to have some done in the latter part of July or the first half of August. So for several years the "breaking brigades" were able to run their teams for four months each year, and it was profitable business.

With all the crudeness, with all the exposure, with all the privations and hard times—for there were hard times in



those days—yet, the passing of those pioneer days with the quaint old “prairie breaking-plow,” the string of oxen, the old prairie-schooner wagon, the elk and deer, with now and then a buffalo, the prairie chickens, the “dug-outs”, sod houses and log cabins, give to us old pioneer settlers a tinge of sadness difficult to express in words; for with all these have gone a great deal of that community and fellowship of neighborhood feeling, so common and so heartily expressed from one to another in the abounding hospitality and in the kindly exchange of help in those days. Then those living miles apart were friends and neighbors. Now the families living on adjoining quarter sections are strangers. Today it seems that each one thinks he must “go it alone,” as did the old “prairie breaking-plow,” which usually did go it alone, for it was so constructed as to hold itself; except at the beginning and at the end of the furrows there was little handling of the rear end of the long lever. It was easily made to take the sod and to leave it at the farther end.

While we say good-bye to this bygone “breaking-plow,” let us not forget that it—like those early and hardy pioneers, rude though they were in some respects, like the old plow and other tools in that day—has bequeathed to us, who are reaping the rich harvest of their sowing, an inheritance of which we can be proud, and for which I most truly hope we are grateful.

WILLOWEDGE FARM, NEAR FT. DODGE, MAY, 1902.

NOTE.—Farmer Coffin does not mention the “colter” attached to the plow-beam, but the artist who drew the original of our cut has added it. At first it was a steel blade fastened to the beam, and extending down close to the point of the “shear,” to cut the sod preparatory to its being turned over; but later on the rolling-colter was invented, as we are informed, by John Deere, of Moline, Ill., who also invented the steel plow. This sharp, circular disk cut the sod much better than the primitive straight blade. The word is spelled variously, as “colter,” “coulter,” and “cutter.”—EDITOR.

## COUNCIL BLUFFS IN 1852.

Hon. Thomas J. Bunn, ex-mayor and ex-postmaster of Bloomington, Illinois, has had a picturesque and varied experience and nothing is more enjoyable than to catch him in one of his reminiscent moods and listen to his dramatic talk of pioneer days. Recently he detailed his experience in Council Bluffs fifty years ago, to Mr. E. M. Prince, secretary of the McLean County (Ill.) Historical Society, who has kindly furnished a copy to THE ANNALS, as follows:

I came to Bloomington, Illinois, with my father in 1833, when only three months old. I have been by turns printer, blacksmith, dry goods clerk, land agent, speculator and politician. In 1866 I opened the first coal-shaft in Bloomington and discovered the underground body of water from which Bloomington draws its present supply. My life at least has been a busy one.

In 1852 my older brother Ben and I took the gold fever and started for California. At Peoria we had engaged passage to St. Louis on the Illinois river steamer, Prairie State. But I was taken down with fever and ague which delayed us. The Prairie State blew up at Pekin on that trip. After waiting in vain a few days for me to recover, my brother went on and I was to follow as soon as I got over "the shakes," and meet him at Council Bluffs. At St. Louis I had intended to take the steamer Kansas for the upper Missouri, but was delayed and had to take another steamer which overtook the Kansas at Lexington, Missouri, and just as we were about to pass it the Kansas blew up. Above the old Kansas City landing the Missouri river was so treacherous that the boat did not run at night but tied up to the bank and waited until daylight. After a tedious passage we reached Council Bluffs, then called Kaneshville. By a misunderstanding I missed my brother who waited for me at the lower crossing of the Missouri about ten miles below Kaneshville. I was stranded in a strange land hundreds of miles away from home with no acquaintances and little money. I was a mere slip of a blue-eyed boy, only nineteen years of age, but full of life, fun and mischief.



Council Bluffs was then the "wide open" town of the western frontier. Iowa, except a fringe of towns and settlements on its eastern border, was an almost unbroken prairie wilderness. Beyond the Missouri was another wilderness of plain and mighty mountain ranges stretching thousands of miles to the Pacific, with only a few "forts," or trading posts like Bridger or Laramie to break the monotony of the wilderness. It was the last town between the "coast and the states." Bordering the Missouri river was a low, alluvial, narrow plain, and back of it the bluffs, which were pierced by an opening which extended on each side back of the bluffs. It was like the figure Y, its foot extending from the river through the bluffs and the arms of the Y extending north and south back of the bluffs. Down these ravines during heavy rains ran quite a large amount of water which, however, was quickly absorbed by the sandy soil. The bluffs were covered with scrubby oaks, and on both sides of the Y there were Indian burial places. The bodies, wrapped in bark, cloth or skins, were put in the limbs of trees to which they were fastened. These places had apparently been long used for this purpose, for there were many bones under the trees and the burial cases were in all stages of decay. The settlement extended from the river along the stream and both arms of the Y.

The buildings were all log cabins; I do not think there was a frame building in the town. Many of the St. Louis merchants had established branch houses there where the thousand and one things the necessities or fancies of the emigrants induced them to buy, could be found. These supplies came by the river steamers from St. Louis. Most of the inhabitants were Mormons living in tents and log cabins. Driven out of Missouri and Illinois they were gathering there for their long journey to Salt Lake. They had two log churches, one on the north branch of the Y and one on the south. The latter was about 100x75 feet, one and a half stories, with rude slab benches seating probably 800. There

were about 1500 Mormons there and in that immediate vicinity. They were all—men, women, and children—missionaries, always ready to argue for their religion, having the Bible at their tongues' end. They published two weekly papers, *The Frontier Guardian* and *The Kaneshville Bugle*.

Besides the Mormons there was a motley population of some three or four hundred roustabouts from the river boats, clerks and merchants in charge of the stores, whisky slingers, gamblers, fast women, and the drunken, thieving, riff-raff that usually makes up a large part of the population of such a place. There was a constant stream of gold seekers passing through by all sorts of conveyances, four-horse and two-horse, and mule teams, ox teams, horseback and muleback, in all sorts of vehicles from the prairie schooner to the buggy. I have seen as many as a thousand teams encamped there at once completing their outfitting and getting ready for their long journey. Adjoining the town on the east was a large Indian reservation, and the town was always swarming with dirty Pawnee bucks, squalid squaws and their half-naked children.

I do not think there were any lawyers there then. Indeed, they had no use for judge or jury. The bullet of the revolver was the sole legal tender of justice. Whoever got the drop on his opponent was the best man and there was no trouble about an inquest.

The recklessness of the gambling mania was over all. Every one seemed willing, anxious to risk his all on the turn of a card or a throw of the dice. I had learned the printer's trade in Illinois and fortunately found work on Elder Orson Hyde's Mormon paper, *The Frontier Guardian*. The king of the gamblers was a man by the name of Johnson, at least that was the name by which he was known. He was a young man, evidently well educated, tall, fine manners, never used intoxicating liquors or tobacco, and never indulged in profane language. Well dressed he looked rather like a parson than a sporting man. He took a great fancy to me and told



me he was from Buffalo, New York, where his mother and sister resided; that they had a hard time in life, that he had taken up gambling as the quickest and easiest way of providing for them and that as soon as he had done that he would quit the business and leave it forever. The principal drinking and gambling place was called the Gem saloon, a long log building with a bar at each end and card tables and a complete gambling outfit in the center. It was open from one week's end to the other. The sound of clinking glasses, the rattle of dice, the drunken oath, the Bacchanalian song never died out. All restraint was thrown to the winds. It seemed as if all the passing gold seekers as well as the professional gamblers wanted to try their luck at the gaming table.

Johnson could act the drunken man to perfection. One evening he came reeling into the Gem and asked in a maudlin way if anyone wanted a game. Among those present were two young men from Wisconsin, emigrants on their way to California, apparently hard-working, honest farmer boys, who probably had never played for money before. Carried away by the prevailing excitement, and perhaps thinking they had "a soft snap" in a drunken man, they accepted Johnson's invitation. The game opened, Johnson knew how to lead them on, and it did not end until late at night, when the boys found themselves stripped of everything—their team even had been staked and lost.

Raking the money off the table into his pocket Johnson went to his sleeping room. This was in another long one-story log building—the rooms were partitioned off with calico and were just large enough for a bed. Johnson and I slept together in the room next the door. In an hour or two there came a loud knocking outside. We both got up and taking our revolvers from under our pillows went to the door. Johnson inquired who was there, and was told that the Wisconsin boys wanted to see him. He unlocked the door and admitted them and asked what they wanted. They replied they

wanted money enough to take them home, otherwise they would have to walk and beg their way back. They did not blame him for their loss, they had lost in a fair game and only asked enough to get them home. He told them to meet him at the wagon yard where their teams were the next morning, and he would see about it. At the appointed time the whole town was there as the request got noised abroad and everyone wanted to see what Johnson would do.

Well shaven and well dressed he looked more like a college professor than a gambler. The boys again said they did not ask him to refund what he had won, only lend them enough to take them back home. He replied that they were not penniless as they still had their outfit worth considerable money which they had not played away. This surprised them as they thought the outfit had gone with the team, but said he, "if I should let you have money you would blow it in the first game you come to." "Oh! no, we wouldn't," they replied; "we have quit gambling forever." Then he said, "I don't know that it would make any difference, but I would like to have you take an oath that you will never gamble any more." They said they were perfectly willing to do so, and then came the strange scene, a boss gambler swearing two of his victims with their right hands uplifted to heaven never again to gamble. It was a solemn scene, the two stalwart young men, bronzed by toil in the sun, hands hardened by daily work with the ax and plow, with bowed heads, repeating after the earnest, elegant Johnson—"In the presence of Almighty God, and these witnesses, I do most solemnly promise and swear hereafter forever to wholly abstain from all and every kind of gambling, betting and games of chance."

Then ensued the most singular event in my somewhat varied life. In the presence of these three or four hundred people, professional gamblers, saloon keepers, and toughs of every description, Johnson delivered the most eloquent lecture against gambling I ever heard. He then gave the boys



all the money he had won from them—fifteen hundred dollars—and then said, “I suppose that you would like to go to California.” “Yes,” they replied, “that is what we started for.” “Well,” said he, “the team might as well go with the money, take the team. Go on your way and behave yourselves.” What became of either party I never knew, the boys started on their long western journey, and that fall when I returned to Illinois Johnson came as far as St. Louis with me, and his last words were “Tommy, *never*, NEVER, NEVER touch a card,” but whether he quit I don’t know, probably not, for once a gambler always a gambler is the usual rule. The craving for excitement usually breaks the best resolutions of those who once get accustomed to games of chance.

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EARLY IOWA HISTORY.—The original Council Bluffs was on the west side of the Missouri river, and was so named by Lewis and Clark, because of the council with the Otoe and Missouri Indians they held there August 3, 1804. It was on the bluff where Fort Calhoun was afterwards built. It is in what is now Washington county, Nebraska. (See Iowa Historical Record, x, 74.) As to the “neutral ground”, it was a strip forty miles wide from the Mississippi to the Des Moines. By treaty of August 10, 1825, a dividing line between the Sioux and the Sacs and Foxes was created for the purpose of keeping those tribes from the wars with each other to which they had been addicted. They still quarrelled, however, and another treaty was made July 15, 1830, by which the Sioux ceded a strip of twenty miles north of said dividing line to the United States, and the Sacs and Foxes ceded a strip of twenty miles south of said line to the United States. This was “neutral ground”. After the Black Hawk war it was turned over to the Winnebagoes by treaty of September 15, 1832, in exchange for their lands east of the Mississippi, and occupied by them until 1845-6. —*Dr. Wm. Salter in Des Moines Register, Feb. 23, 1902.*

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