

Pioneer Iowa Homes

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By N. TJERNAGEL

Log houses were the order in Iowa in pioneer days; only a few frame houses were seen in our section. The material for the latter was obtained largely from a Mr. House who had brought a portable saw-mill with him across the prairies. Dan and Henry McCarthy from Ames were employed to run the outfit. According to James Brown, who lived a few miles south of Story City, the mill was in operation in 1856, when he obtained lumber for his house there. The Heglands near Roland, in the year 1857, put up a large frame building, the only one of its kind in that vicinity, the lumber having come from Noah Harden's saw-mill, formerly the House mill, just east of the site of Story City.

As the years went by, frame-houses became the rule and not the exception. Some of the earliest comers found retreats in the hillsides in sod-houses, where one could manage to keep cool, or warm, as one pleased. Ventilation was usually left to look out for itself. Mother Earth was sometimes left to provide the floor herself. French calls were frequently made in these homely retreats by unappreciative company such as toads, lizards, and sometimes snakes. The jolliest, most cheerful family known in our neighborhood lived in a sod-house. Their kindly hearts came to the surface and gave bright reflection, that was all.

THE BROUHARD LOG CABIN

While on a jaunt in the woods near the old Kimball place some seven miles southeast of Story City, we found ourselves upon a picturesque eminence overlooking Bear creek. Though the surroundings were pleasing to the eye, our attention was centered mainly on what once had been a rather pretentious log-house, built here by Joseph Brouhard in 1854, and still standing—although somewhat tottering—a monument to the intrepid pioneer who pushed his way into the wilderness and set up one of the advance beacons of civilization on these western plains.

The massive oak logs forming the exterior of the old dwelling, tell of a wealth of virgin timber. The material still intact, gives evidence of quite skillful hewing. The walnut siding has disappeared, with the exception of a section on the east wall. Though it has weathered the elements these many years, if re-nailed, some of this siding would yet be serviceable. There are two large adjoining rooms designed to accomodate the inmates comfortably; and we may be sure that many a traveler here found welcome and shelter as the immigration ebbed and flowed. This old granddaddy of the plains must have had an eye for beauty to have chosen such an attractive spot for a home. Who knows, but the lively, questing spirit of these frontier scouts may also have been buoyant with esthetic and poetic feeling and sentiments? Who can look upon such a remnant of a former era with anything less than awe and reverence?

Here, one of the daring frontier pickets planted himself to breast the elements, subdue the virgin soil, and meet the buffets of whatever hostile fortune might await him. However, as he was imbued with a will to succeed, success followed and served as an inspiration to others. If no one had taken the initiative and fearlessly pressed ahead, there would have been no trail for the more timid to follow. Without advance guards the stragglers in the rear would have lost heart and remained confined in narrower territory. What of development and progress without these brave leaders, who so determinedly set forth to build communities in these rich, far-flung areas where as yet civilized man had scarcely set foot?

Why are their successors, their beneficiaries, so slow and apathetic about properly recognizing and commemorating the fortitude of those first comers, their struggles and eventual successes? Why do we not pay frequent visits to their early places of abode and turn them into memorial shrines? Why not roof over yonder venerable pile, repair it reasonably well and let the old Brouhard house tell its story for another ninety years? And with continued care and attention it might stand for centuries and thus hand down the epic of the prairie to many future generations.

BUILDING UNDER DIFFICULTIES

Nels Peterson, pioneer who located on a picturesque slope overlooking the timber a mile northeast of the present town of Randall, had the intention of preparing a dug-out to live in. At the last moment, however, he had a revulsion of feeling at the thought of "digging himself and family down in the ground," also of thus providing a burrow for creeping pests, especially snakes, of which he had a particular horror. So he altered his plans and arranged to erect a real house, a building to be made of well-selected logs. Accordingly, he undertook the task of hewing out the timbers for such a structure. He had no one except his wife to aid him, but by dint of hard, persevering work he not only fashioned the logs to his satisfaction, but laid them in place so that the house was ready for occupancy in the fall of the year.

All the boards used for flooring and otherwise were hauled in one load and obtained for the sum of sixty dollars. The proved to be so full of knots that later when many little feet helped wear it down the knots projected, so that Nels often stumbled over them when crossing the room. This exasperated him to the point that he "grabbed an axe and chopped their heads off." Having no plane he had no choice of tools. Nels made his own chairs, fashioning them from hollow logs sawed through lengthwise, with saplings for legs. They reposed at night on a straw mattress laid on tautly-stretched bed-cord held in place by fence-rails finished off for this purpose.

In his rather hurried preparations to build, Peterson had not stopped to calculate upon the natural result of putting up unseasoned material, which, upon duly shrinking, left gaping chinks between the logs. This provided better ventilation than was necessary, though less menacing to health, no doubt, than many a modern residence sealed up tight to exclude the outer atmosphere as effectively as possible. All available rags were stuffed into the openings to keep out the cold, and as they had no newspapers; even old love letters were pressed into service and again made for warmth, this time by being pasted over the ever-appearing chinks.

During this period, visiting friends took considerable interest in examining the walls.

Nels started plastering quite late the next season, yet in time, as he hoped, to apply the material safely and successfully, so as to close the innumerable crannies that had multiplied tenfold since early spring. He was very thorough in his work and labored long and faithfully over each batch of mortar, being determined to get the ingredients rightly mixed and no mistake. He used so little water that it became a Herculean task to knead the mess properly. He applied it to the offending chinks with vengeful energy, so as to close the gaps for good; and he patted the mortar as he applied it with many a deft stroke and caress. The next day, after application and an unexpectedly cold night, it occurred to him that the preparation had grown hard with surprising quickness. But being very busy, he did not linger to make close observation.

However, the stove solved the problem for him. Having set it up in the evening, so that they might have warmth and enjoy the fruits of his labors, imagine his utter dismay when at night a terrific clatter from falling plaster roused him from his pleasant dreams, and lo! the chinks eyed him as before! He suspected that his dry method was partly at fault, but admitted the sly Jack Frost had outwitted him, and catching him unawares held the material in place until the stove gave heat and then it had no choice other than to let go.

Nels had built a single window into the cabin, and this faced the east, whence could be welcomed the rising sun; below lay the beautiful Skunk river valley. It was at this little window, when our dear aunt Larsine, Mrs. Peterson, was alone one night, that a gaunt wolf suddenly made its terrifying appearance before it, glaring menacingly at the solitary occupant of the cabin. Her fears were allayed, however, at the fairly prompt return of her husband from a rather extended journey. In spite of more or less of danger and trial, they loved their simple home, and were filled with gratitude to God for this and other blessings.

A LOG HOUSE OF PARTS

Lars Sheldall's spacious log house in southwest Scott township (1855) was built from selected logs that had been transported over the ice on the Skunk river from the south beyond the town of Fairview, later Story City. Under the hospitable roof of the new building friends foregathered, meetings were held, and Divine services were conducted. Religious worship was held mostly in the evenings, and took place in the 16 x 16 main room. Owing to circumstances peculiar to pioneer days, children were sometimes left unbaptized much longer than in older communities. In one instance then the baptism of several children had been delayed until they were old enough to walk up to the improvised baptismal font themselves to receive baptism. The Rev. P. A. Rasmussen, of Norway, Illinois, came at rather sparse intervals to serve this little spiritual outpost in the long ago; the way was difficult, and the opportunity for travel depended largely upon chance. Though the place of worship was plain, the power of Word and Sacrament were nonetheless blessed; the communion with the Lord was, if anything, fully as intimate and fervent in the modest worshiping places of old as in the more pretentious sanctuaries of today.

THE LOG SCHOOLHOUSE

Logs were sometimes used in rough-and-ready structures for stock and otherwise, but generally straw-sheds served such purposes. However, log schoolhouses were not unknown. Rasmus Sheldall attended school at Fairview, where a vacated log building had been converted into a seat of learning. The children of the early comers, Truman Squires, George Prime, George Sowers, and Mr. Burham, attended school with him. Annie Shurtleff was the teacher. At night the institution would sometimes be used for dancing, Hoosiers, for the most part, supplying both dancers and music.

Poverty schoolhouse, in Starvation Hollow, a few miles southeast of Story City, was a well-known institution of learning in the early pioneer days. During the days of its earliest existence the community felt the lack of the necessi-

ties and comforts of life very keenly, noting which, facetious contemporaries perpetrated above appellations. The school building was of logs and had a shake roof. Such roofs consisted of great slabs of hewn timber, one overlapping the other, thus excluding wind and moisture. At a proper height from the floor holes were bored into the log wall wherein strong stakes were set, and with boards laid thereon and fastened—presto! there was your desk. Seats were made on the principle of the old-fashioned milking-stool, only they were longer and wider and boasted four legs. There was no menace of rusty nails, wooden pins having preceded them in the order of time. The door swung on wooden hinges, which not only creaked, but sometimes shrieked when made to perform its functions.

The schoolhouse was used for meetings of various kinds, religious, political or other. There were traveling clergymen who sought to elucidate religious texts; and there were fiery exhorters who burned in their zeal to impress their listeners. The various preachers furnished variety, but there was not much regularity in their visits. Related series of religious teachings were made difficult, if not impossible, amidst such haphazard service. Some folks rode, while many used their legs in their comings and goings to church and otherwise. Charley Wier related that he and his mother often walked barefoot from Story City to religious services in the Poverty schoolhouse.

Concerning politics no one spoke in whispers, and the old schoolhouse often resounded to the din of loudly vociferated ideas as to how this government should be run. No doubt the speakers had as good brains as most politicians, if not better; and their honesty we do not question, for, you see, most of them had Honest Abe as their model.

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