

An Iowa Settler's Homestead

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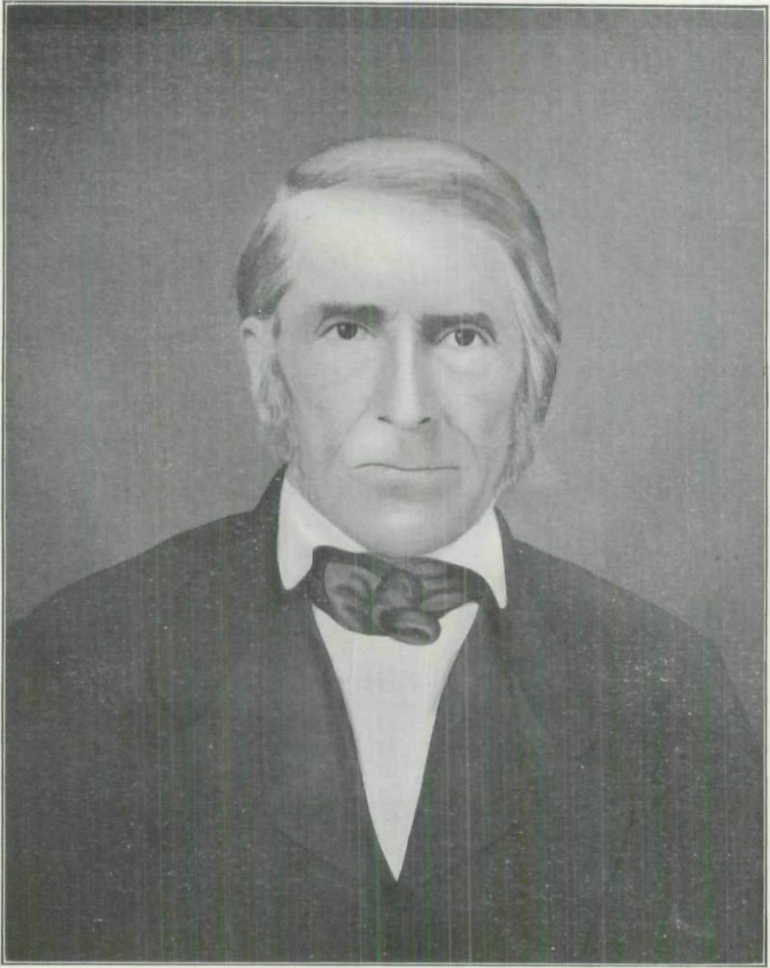
AN IOWA SETTLER'S HOMESTEAD.

BY GEORGE C. DUFFIELD.

James Duffield, his wife, Margaret, and their children, Maria, John, George Crawford (the writer), James, William, Joseph, Joshua Harrison, and Elizabeth, composed the first family circle within the present limits of the State of Iowa, west of the great bend of the Des Moines river, save one, that of Samuel Clayton, who arrived in November, 1836. We moved into our cabin, two miles west of Clayton's, in April, 1837, where soon after this circle was enlarged by the birth of Henry D.

Accustomed to some of the luxuries of the east, the settlers sought conveniences here, making their claims "'cordin' to wood 'n water." My father placed his cabin in the border of an opening in the timber, near a spring, which fed a rivulet entering Chequest creek two miles above its mouth.

The scenes and experiences of that cabin life commencing in my fourteenth year are sweet and vivid memories. My senses were constantly thrilled. The mornings passed something like this—supposing it to be the summer of 1838: "Clink, clink, clink," my sleepy eyes would open on father bent down to the hearth, striking flint on steel. Then came a pause as he blew and blew the tiny spark into a spreading ember. Quiet for a time and a nap for me. "Maria, Maria," came the call from mother's bed, "the kettle is boiling." And then Maria's "William! George! Jimmie! Clear out!" This meant that we were to get off the floor with our made-down bed so that the table could be set. Out we bounced, or, lingering in the way we were tumbled *sans culotte* upon the puncheon floor, and a second offense was a swiftly switched breach of discipline. The floor being cleared the dry goods box table was set where we had slept. The baking corn bread, the frying pork or venison, and the coffee (for father and mother only) boiling on the fire, filled



James Duffield

JAMES DUFFIELD,
A pioneer settler near Keosauqua, Van Buren county, Iowa.

the room with appetizing odors. Meantime John had hunted the hills and hollows, had driven up, yoked and tied "Dick" and "Buck" near the door. Father had fed "Old Jule" and cut and split wood for the day. William came from the spring with a pail of water. Those of us who were large enough had gone along, and in the stream below had washed our faces, drying them in the air on our way back. Lucky were we if mother did not send us back for a more thorough effort. From William's pail father took a cup of the cold fresh water, and, hanging his hat on the cabin corner, made his toilet in this way: Placing the cup between his knees and spreading his heels apart he splashed into his clasped hands the exact amount of water needed. The filled hands were rubbed, the proper lurch added a good bath for the face, and the last splash into the hands was carried to the hair and thoroughly rubbed in. A homespun towel did for his face what the breezes did for ours. The comb was tightly seized in the right hand, the left being extended tightly upon the hair above the left ear. It was raked across the forehead, and back until the last stroke brought the back part of the hair under the ear. The comb then changed hands, the right hand marking the place the left had fixed; when done, the part, if it could be called such, extended from the forehead to the nape of the neck with both ears completely hidden. The last stroke was to throw a roach over the front of the forehead, more, perhaps, to put the hair away from the eyes than to decorate the head. Such, with lustrous and luxuriant black hair, was the appearance of one settler's toilet. And such was the appearance of all the boys in the family. (Mother was our barber and she got around to the task of cutting our hair once or twice a year. The head being combed, she started the shears in below the left ear, clipped around and came out under the right. If the edges were even it was a good job.) Well, the toilet made, father, mother and the eldest boys sat down to breakfast. The girls and smaller children awaiting the sec-

ond, if, indeed, not the third table. We were now turned outdoors.

Mornings in the spring were a delight. On every side the sight and scent met blooming crab, service berry, choke cherry, and the various thorns and luxuriant annuals. The woods were a chorus; perhaps more nearly an orchestra. For the music of the new and brilliantly plumed songsters was joined in lustily by the drumming pheasant, the tapping woodpecker, the whistling quail and gobbling turkey. For two or three summers we boys were each morning to be found on the outskirts of an Indian camp, commingling with the dogs and children and eager to indulge our opportunities. Mother was to the Indians "a good squaw," and father's worst criticism on her economy was that she shared with them her scanty stores. A day's history can be made from the experiences we had. Leaving our cabin with certain strings made for us by mother, a part of what had been a hunting knife, and no more clothing than necessary to support the pockets, we went to the camp. Our play-fellows went with us to the creek where the choicest swimming holes were ours. To our strings they joined hooks for which they had bartered with a trader. One of the Indian boys and I went to get the bait; he did not set me to turning rocks and logs or tearing the tough sod for angle-worms. He led me up the creek, then into a cleft in the rocky bluff where it looked and felt as if the sun had never shone. Creeping between the mossy banks he ran his hands under the roots of the great ferns and among the leaves and began handing me the bait for which he sought—the fresh, tender, slimy snails, whose shells in countless thousands the wooden mold-board turned up on the claims of the timber settlers in that early day. Filling our pockets and hands we returned to the others, who with our broken knife had prepared our poles. With the rudest tackle and the Indian's bait it was not difficult to take a nice string of fine bass, perch and pick-erel, by the middle of the afternoon. We returned with the

Indians to their camp. As usual the squaws asked us to eat. Hanging near one of the teepees was the carcass of a large bear, the skin still on, and none of the meat seemed to have been taken out. The odor from the kettles and from the fragments which dropped into the fire started the saliva in our mouths, and caused us to accept the invitation with unanimous voice. Of course the visiting "skin-a-ways" were favored guests, and my Indian companion brought to me a fresh clean piece of bark on which lay a steaming piece of that big bear. My hands almost trembled in hungry and appreciative expectancy. Then I saw that I was offered a whole unskinned, unscraped foot of the bear. I put it from me; but my companion threw away the bark, took the hot paw in his dirty hands, pulled off the nails and hair with his teeth and spit them out, then ate that foot. I had not noticed the cooking process till now. One of the kindest and most active of the squaws sat in the door of her teepee rapidly drawing into the kettle at her left the entrails of the bear, as with her right hand she stripped out their contents.

These first few years of our residence were the last years of the Sacs and Foxes in this locality. Both Keokuk and Black Hawk were with the tribe. Keokuk was the chief, and his coming and going was remarked by both the Indians and the settlers. He was of fine appearance, dignified and austere. Black Hawk, on the contrary, was not very highly regarded by the tribe, and not much noticed by the settlers until his death in 1838 a few miles above here, when a great deal was said about his life and achievements by both whites and Indians. Both Keokuk and Black Hawk were often at our cabin, and I remember their appearance well. The latter was sadly dilapidated in appearance, wearing ill-kept garments of the whites' style and manufacture, while he was nearly always in a state of at least semi-intoxication. I have heard this fact disputed in late years, but I can positively assert its truth. We thought little of their doings at the time, but now it seems strange that they should have been

wholly interested in the compensation the government was making them, and not have regretted leaving the rich sugar tree groves in which they had so long lived along the Chequest, or the graves they had made along the hills and river banks above its mouth.

The duties of a settler on his claim and of his wife about the cabin were simple though severe. The responsibility was all theirs, but they had the finest knack of distributing it. Father directed the outdoor force, planning every task, yet relying for its certain and correct execution on the boys under the management of John, aged twenty. How father urged and excited even the youngsters to heap the brush and logs all day long for the sole apparent purpose of the delight of the big fire at night! I did not learn for twenty years that he was getting overtime out of me. His management through John admitted of his necessarily long and tedious trips into Illinois and Missouri to mill and market. On these trips he usually took one of his children, to that extent relieving mother's cares. On her part, mother used the same ingenuity, having Maria, aged twenty-two, upon whom to rely. Every child able to carry wood or run errands was Maria's assistant. Mother bore and cared for the babies, saw that the floor was white and clean, that the beds were made and cared for, the garden tended, the turkeys dressed, the deer flesh cured and the fat prepared for candles or culinary use, that the wild fruits were garnered and preserved or dried, that the spinning and knitting was done and the clothing made. She did her part in all these tasks, made nearly all the clothing and did the thousand things for us a mother only finds to do. But as assistants in the training of the children, the performance of hard labor and the bearing of the burdens of the settlers' lives, the Johns and Marias of pioneer life have never received their full credit. Devoutness is characteristic of women, and "the peace that passeth understanding" abode in our mother. Father, less filled with grace, enforced the rules of righteousness in the family, and



Margaret Duffield

MARGARET DUFFIELD,

A pioneer settler near Keosauqua, Van Buren county, Iowa, wife of James Duffield.

to others outside, with stern exactness. It was he who made it compulsory that we keep every promise, attend any religious service within walking distance and observe the Sabbath. And my father's cabin was ruled as every other settler's. The habits of the settlers were strangely alike. Exceptions there were where a cabin was occupied by a settler preparing for and awaiting the arrival of his family from the east, or where a lone bachelor occupied his claim. I never knew a settler's cabin presided over by a childless woman.

Father had been a tavern keeper and in a small way dealt in live stock in Steubenville, Ohio, prior to coming into Fulton county, Illinois, where he lived three years. The family left in Illinois a good stock of kitchen and table necessities, and frequent trips there supplied our cabin with a better equipment than was usual among the settlers. The idea in moving into Iowa, and across the river, was that the open country would furnish free pasture for much stock, and our force was sufficient to break enough ground on our claim, and otherwise to care for it. Driving the stock to eastern markets would be done by our own force and without expense. There was a full intention of acquiring title to a quarter section when we came, but that the open country would ever be taken up, or that land values would ever advance to a point equaling other profits to be derived from the open lands, did not enter father's mind. Especial effort was made to acquire hogs and cattle. These were driven out into the woods and even to Indian prairie, six miles west, to be taken up in the fall and made ready for market. Had advancing land values been in the settlers' minds, this prairie would surely have been taken up. As it was, the first claim hunters, and in fact all who came in '37, '38 and '39 and stopped at our cabin, returned from the prairie saying that it would never be settled as it was so far out, and without wood or water. Our own family acquired several claims, and not one left the wooded, hilly country.

Before the first land sales in November, 1838, the coun-

try was thronged with these claim hunters. During the summer seasons there was not a week that our cabin did not house from one to five or six at a time, and each stayed from one to several days, going out over the unclaimed country. Some of these visitors were like ourselves, bona fide seekers after cheap homes. Another class did not wear the plain clothes nor rough manners of the settlers, but a smooth manner, a ruffled shirt during the week, and a bit of jewelry, marking them as speculators. To these I never knew father or mother to offer an impatient or discourteous word, but I knew them to withhold information which they cheerfully volunteered to others. These speculators did not hesitate to acquaint the settlers with the fact that the United States owned the lands, and whoever purchased them would have right to possession. This aroused much uneasiness and disturbed the peace and quiet of the settlers. The children, though grown up, witnessed the contention, even if they did not share the apprehension. Their work and love for the claim and cabin was precious to them. In the summer of 1838 a plan was set afloat by settlers whereby it was understood that those occupying lands should not bid against one another at the sales, nor suffer bidding by unknown persons. I have tried to discover written evidence of these understandings, but fear none has been preserved. Aaron W. Harlan, who entered a part of Section 31 of what was afterward Van Buren township, in which the town of Keosauqua is situated, and who is yet living, says:

The first meeting of the settlers for the purpose was at the house of Uriah Biggs on his claim near Pittsburg (N. E. $\frac{1}{4}$, Sec. 14); Lemuel G. Jackson, whose claim was in Section 1, was president, and Biggs, secretary. For that township there was a court of three persons appointed to settle any differences among the settlers, and James Knox was appointed bidder for the township. Among other things done there was a resolution offered by me, which Biggs amended so as to read:

Resolved, That our government is by the people, of the people, and for the people, and that *we are the people*."

There were two or three contested claims, but our court settled them, and when the first sales for the township occurred in November, 1838, at

Burlington, we had more fear than difficulty. Our proceedings were the first in the State of this character, and many from other localities came and examined them. The people of West Point township, Lee county, adopted them without change. They were copied in many other places, and I think the system was followed generally throughout the territory prior to the sales.

When the time came for the sales there was some dread that the plan would fail. Though the differences among the settlers seemed gone, those with the speculators were ahead. When father left home to go to Burlington about the first of November, 1838, mother and the whole family were worried. I shall not forget his start. He went on horseback in company with other settlers, and there was no apparent reason for fear, yet all did fear. To feed his horse he took a bag of shelled oats—there were no threshed oats in those days. In the oats he put two hundred dollars borrowed from Thomas Devin at fifty per cent interest. I do not think my father put anything else in the bag, though of this I can not be sure, for it is recorded in history that the settlers at that first sale had weapons available. It will be remembered that when the settlements were begun, the territory east of the Black Hawk Purchase had been laid off in congressional townships—in 1836, 1837, and 1838, by William Burt, inventor of the solar compass. The west line of the purchase ran from a point on the Missouri line in a northeasterly direction, just touching the northwest corner of Jackson township, Van Buren county, and intersecting the line of Cedar county where the Cedar river enters. The settler who blazed or staked his claim, or built a cabin or claim pen, knew that when the country should be sectionized the claim and even cabin might be cut in pieces; but that some speculator, without the feeling of love for home, or of anything but gain, might step in and dispossess him, was a thing he could not comprehend. So, when the sales began, and General Ver Planck Van Antwerp and John C. Breckenridge, then a strippling, but afterward vice president of the United States, stepped out and read the act of congress and proclamation authoriz-

ing the sale, and especially when that portion was announced where a penalty was attached to any act preventing open, free and honest competition in the auction of the lands, a silent smile on the settlers' faces spoke their contempt.

A settler's feelings may be imagined by father's account of his own experience. Parcels were put up on which no settler lived, and bidding was free and open. Next a settler's claim would be put up and the dollar and a quarter bid, and any effort on the part of the crier was met with silence from the crowd. At last township 69, range 10, was reached. The surveys had shown our claim to be the northwest quarter of this section, the lines singularly falling within a few rods of father's original blazes. The quarter was offered. Knox, the bidder, shouted "one twenty-five." Father said he felt sure some one else would bid and that the suspense of waiting would overcome him. At last, "sold! to— James Duffield," said Knox. Father felt like hastening at once to pay for the land and starting home, but the settlers' interests were a common interest, and honor bound him to await the end. The trip home was a short one to him. The welcome he received when we saw him coming down the trail with success showing in his dark countenance was the best I ever helped to give him. The children even felt the joy of possession supported by title. Our claim and cabin were now indeed our own.

I tried to describe a morning at the cabin. I wish I could describe an evening. Age makes one think of evening. There, all about the unfenced dooryard, lay huge dry logs, dragged there for the winter fires, unused when the summer came. On these we children played. Within the wide doorway, through which, in winter, these great logs were dragged by "Old Jule," to be rolled as back-sticks on the fire, sat father and mother. The sun's red streaks shot up from "the deadening" beyond the field. The planning for to-morrow done, mother calls the little ones, and with her they disappear within. No lights in summer time. The

girls soon follow mother, and the poor, tired old John. "Buck" and "Dick" rub their yoke-chafed necks against the trees and stroll away into the woods, browsing as they go. "Old Whitey," the cow, kneels, then drops on her puffed-out side, driving her breath from her nostrils with a snort that tells of pain from fullness. The orchestra of the morning has changed its tune and plays an air of the summer night. The insects grate their accompaniment to the colloquy of owl and whippoorwill. Father rises, drags his chair from the doorway to its accustomed corner, steps out and straightens up his figure. Looking to the west and north, he gives his opinion that to-morrow will bring fine weather. Announcing that all should be in bed, he retires into the cabin. Jim lays his sleepy head upon his log. Nothing breaks the stillness but the sounds which memory still brings me when alone. Away off the whimpering howl of the timber wolf. In different directions the answering bark of neighbors' dogs. "Old Ketch" slips to the foot of the hill and bawls out his sentiments and sneaking back curls up below my feet. My eyes grow heavy. The chilly air creeps up from the creek. I slip down, shake Jim, and, speechless, we stagger in. Our thumbs are lifting our "galluses" as we cross the doorsill. Our breeches clog our ankles as we drag across the floor, and slip off as we crawl over the foot of our made-down bed. Sleep? Like logs!

In 1840 a law passed the city council levying a tax of one dollar on each dog, or making it the duty of the marshal to destroy each dog not so paid for. One dog was paid for that year and the rest went free. This year again we know of but one who has paid a dog tax, and hear of but two dogs being destroyed. What a glorious thing it is to have a corporation.—*Davenport, Iowa, Sun, August 6, 1842.*

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