

PIONEER LIFE.

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PAPER NO. III.

Early Credit System and Scarcity of Money—The Backwoods Cabin and Its Construction—Improvements; the Hewed Log House—Capacity of the "Hoosier's Nest"—Household Equipment; Culinary Utensils; the Fireplace; "Reflector" and "Dutch Oven"; Home-Made Woodenware; the Gourd; Furniture; the Loom and the Spinning-Wheel.

THE first settlers of Henry county were, as a rule, poor people. After the young pioneer had paid for his half-quarter or quarter section of land at the government price of \$1.25 per acre, he seldom had any money left with which to improve it or for the support of his family, and credit was a necessity. Thus the county was literally cleared up and improved on credit. The conditions of the times begot this custom, and the merchants and other business men, perforce, gave credit freely, and these in return received from the great eastern houses long credit, their accounts sometimes being carried year after year. Notwithstanding delays in payment, however, little money was lost, for honesty of purpose was the rule then, and the pioneers paid their debts as faithfully and promptly as their accumulations would permit.

Under these circumstances it is obvious that the settler could enjoy few luxuries. Life was a struggle to discharge the obligations hanging over him and for the bare necessities. He and his family had in large measure to be self-supporting, in the matter of clothes as well as food, and all are familiar with the story of the spinning-wheel and the loom, and the home-made fabrics, as well as the table supplies wrung from the forest and the clearing.

The backwoods cabin was, perhaps, as primitive a structure as was ever adopted by a civilized people. John Finley, in his famous "Hoosier's Nest," describes it as

"A buckeye cabin,
Just big enough to hold Queen Mab in."

Finley's picture of this domicile, both inside and out, is true to life, but it must be said that the "buckeye" cabin was hardly the typical one, as other logs, such as sugar-tree, beech, ash and poplar, being more durable, were generally used. Buckeye, however, being easily worked, sometimes served, and it is said that these, sending out sprouts during the first summer, would cover the walls with greenery, partially concealing the house amid the foliage of the woods. For these cabins, when of the most primitive form, the surrounding forest furnished practically everything. Logs of a uniform size, notched and saddled at the ends, formed the walls, the openings being sawed out; long poles laid across from gable to gable served the purpose of both rafters and sheeting, and the clapboards, weighted down with other poles, made the sheltering roof. Logs hewed to an even surface formed the puncheon floor. The rude door, with its wooden latch, was hung on wooden hinges, and even the fireplace, a cavernous recess of smaller logs and rived slabs, lined "from the red clay on the hill," was fashioned from the material at hand.

A more specific description of some of these features of construction may be permissible. The opening for the fireplace, from five to ten feet wide, was sawed out of the wall, as were the windows and doors. From this opening outward was built an enclosure like a pen, of small, split logs, the outer ends notched and saddled, as were the corners of the cabin, and the inner ends secured to the ends of the house logs by pins driven in. Inside of this three-walled enclosure a similar temporary one was built with a space of twelve or fifteen inches between the two sets of walls, and into this space moist clay was firmly pounded and left to dry. When the false wall was removed or burned away this clay formed a protecting back and jambs for the fireplace, extending four or five feet up, and above this was constructed the chimney of rived sticks built up in a diminishing square and heavily plastered with clay. The hearth and bottom of the fireplace were made by filling in with clay to the level of the cabin floor and this was pounded with a maul until rendered hard and firm, then well wet with water and scraped to a smooth surface with a wooden scraper.

The chinks or spaces between the logs that formed the walls of the house were filled in with short sticks split to fit into the crevices as snugly as possible, and these were plastered over with tough clay or mortar, which shut out the weather very effectually. After the cabin was erected spaces were sawed out for doors and windows, and slabs secured to the ends of these sawed logs by wooden pins served at once to hold them in place and to make frames to the openings. To exclude the weather and admit light, the windows, before the introduction of glass, were covered by a sheet of paper stretched across and pasted to the frame and rendered semi-transparent by greasing. The doors were made of broad slabs fastened to cross battens by means of wooden pins. These battens were longer than the width of the door, the projecting ends being furnished with holes into which pins would set, and these pins were in other slabs or "heads" that were attached to the logs at the jamb of the door. The wooden latch was raised from the outside by a "latch-string" that passed through a small auger-hole and hung out. When this was drawn in the door was securely fastened.

These cabins, built entirely without the use of nails or any scrap of iron, were the most primitive of our backwoods domiciles. After the first years glass and other imported material became more or less common, and with the establishment of sawmills sawed boards took the place of hewed slabs. The next improvement in construction was the house of hewed logs. These, by comparison, presented quite a neat appearance, with their smooth walls and mortar daubing and with floors, frames and finishing of yellow poplar, and when of two or more rooms were considered particularly fine. They were sometimes of two stories, and the earlier taverns and business houses in the villages or on the principal highways were usually of this kind.

Some of these houses, while they would be considered small now, were regarded as spacious then, and indeed, their capacity for accommodation was something to be wondered at. The rearing in them of large families was the rule rather than the exception, and there was always room for friends and kinfolks. The taverns, by utilizing auxiliary space, were like the proverbial stage-coach, in which there is always room for one more. The late Mark L. Wilson kept a hewed log hotel a mile east of

Lewisville, known in its day as "The Buck Horn Tavern," in which, during the palmy days of the old National Road, he sometimes kept over a hundred guests of a summer's night by aid of the hay-mows and covered wagons of the movers.

The simple log-cabin home is an integral part of the earlier history of Indiana. To the rising generation it is almost unknown, except by hearsay, and yet in these humble abodes, which may be called veritable gifts of the forest, were nurtured a majority of the men who laid the foundations of the State and many of whom have reflected luster upon the name of Hoosier—true fledglings of the "Hoosier Nest."

The household equipment of the pioneers was primitive and rude. The late Dr. D. H. Stafford, who came to Henry county in 1823, gave the following as one of several plans for the construction of the beds: Holes were bored in a log of the wall at the proper height from the floor, and into these sticks were driven horizontally, the other ends being supported by upright stakes or posts. Upon the framework thus provided was woven a bottom of withes or bark or deer-skin thongs, which formed a support for the bedding. Privacy was sometimes secured by making the outer supporting posts high enough to be furnished with a concealing curtain.

Hooks on which to hang clothes or other articles were fashioned from the forked or crooked branches of trees, and forked sticks with the addition of pins inserted in the longer arm made pot-hooks which were caught over a pole or "cross-tree" that was fixed in the fireplace a safe distance above the fire, the pots being hung on the pins. An improvement on these was the "trammel-hook," formed of a flat bar of iron hooked at one end, while at the other an adjustable hook could be raised or lowered as desired and secured by means of an iron pin inserted in holes that were drilled along the bar. With the advent of brick chimneys came swinging cranes of iron. These, set in iron eyes embedded in the masonry, could be turned freely, the long arm carrying the pots out over the hearth when desired.

The common culinary utensils were, first of all, the rotund, bulbous-looking pot, constricted at the top with a flare above so

the lids would sit in safely; the long-handled frying-pan, and the iron oven for baking pone. This latter was a vessel perhaps three or four inches deep, set on legs and provided with an iron lid turned up around the edge. In it the thick loaf of corn bread was baked by setting it on a bed of coals with more coals piled upon the lid. A thin, smooth board or broad wooden paddle for the hoecakes was also an essential, and sometimes long-handled waffle irons were part of the outfit. At a later date and with growing prosperity other cooking devices came into use. The "reflector" oven was considered a great invention. This utensil consisted of a light iron frame two to three feet in length, mounted upon short legs, to hold the baking and roasting pans. To the back part of this frame a flaring top was attached by hinges, so that it might be turned back when the cooking needed attention. The sides were also enclosed. This flaring top and sides, made of bright tin, presented a large opening toward the open fire which was supplemented by a bed of live coals drawn out upon the hearth, and from the hood, sides and back of tin the heat was reflected down upon the cooking. It served its purpose well, and surely no better bread, cakes or pies have ever been eaten anywhere than those our mothers used to bake in the old "reflectors" upon the hearth.

When the cook stove made its way into the early homes of the country it was hailed with delight by the majority of the pioneer women because it afforded such great relief to their faces, hands and arms that had been so continually blistered by the great open fires, but some adhered to the fireplace, the old utensils and the old culinary methods as long as they lived. A good many of the more prosperous families used the "Dutch ovens." These were made of small boulders or bricks and mortar, or else of tough clay, wrought and beaten into shape, and burned by slow fires built within. They were usually set upon wooden platforms aloof from the house, by reason of danger from fire, and were protected by a shed. They were principally used in the summer time. In appearance they were rounded domes, not unlike the old-fashioned beehive. The fire was built in them and then raked out and the baking set upon the floor, the body of the oven retaining enough heat to do the cooking.

The woodenware of the household was often made by the

pioneer himself. Trays, large and small, were made from the soft poplar, buckeye and basswood, and these took the place of most of the present-day tin- and crockery-ware. The churn was sometimes a mere trough and paddle. The hominy pestle was a solid beech or maple stump with a bowl-shaped cavity burned in the top to hold the grain while being pounded, and a similar stump cut as smooth as possible made the chopping-block for meat. The rude trough hollowed out from a short log split in half that was used to catch sap from the sugar trees is still a familiar relic from the olden time.

For drinking and dipping vessels the common article was the gourd—one of the most adaptable and convenient gifts of nature to man. In an age when manufactured conveniences were hard to get the gourd was a boon, and in every cabin home it played a conspicuous part. Of many sizes and shapes, it served, when properly scraped out and cleansed, a variety of purposes. It hung as a dipper beside the spring or the well with its long sweep, and in the same capacity it was a companion to the cider barrel and the whisky jug; it was used at the table, at the lye kettle or at the sugar camp for soup, soap or sap; a large one properly halved made a wash-pan or a milk-pan, or, cut with an opening, it became a receptacle for the storing of divers things; a small one was used by the grandmother to darn the family socks over; the boy used one to carry his bait in when he went fishing and the baby used another for a rattle. A veritable treasure was the gourd, and it should be celebrated in song.

There were various curious articles used in the pioneer homes that are now quite obsolete. One of these was the dough-break—a clumsy-looking wooden machine for kneading batches of dough. Another was a yoke that fitted across the shoulders with a thong hanging from either end whereby two buckets of water could be carried, leaving the hands free to carry two more if desired. Among the more well-to-do families, and at a later date, perhaps, we find metal warming-pans which, filled with live embers, were used to iron the sheets of a cold night; lanterns of perforated tin; big dog-irons presenting fantastical fronts of brass; tinder-boxes with their contents of flint, steel, little powder-horns and “punk” from rotten logs, used to start the fires; turning-spits for the meat roasts; candle-molds with

balls of cotton wicking; long tin horns and conch shells to call the men to dinner, and many other conveniences now considered quaint and sought for relics.

As the country grew, many of the home-made articles were supplanted by the products of local artificers. The neighborhood potter supplied rude queensware, such as milk-pans, crocks, jars, jugs, pitchers, and even teapots. This ware was generally used in Henry county fifty or sixty years ago. The village cabinet-maker was an expert, as handsome specimens of his handicraft still to be found will testify. His chairs, cupboards, bureaus and sideboards were made to last as well as to sell, and the furniture put up by such artists in wood as John or Miles Heacock or Jacob Brenneman was good for generations. The writer knows of rockers in this county that have been in use for seventy-five years or more, and the old splint-bottomed chairs with woven seats of thin hickory strips are still to be found in country homes. Twisted corn-husks were also often woven into chair bottoms. Wild cherry, which was common, was a favorite wood for furniture, and those old cherry specimens of the local cabinet-makers' handiwork are still prized by collectors.

One important piece of pioneer furniture, if so it might be called, unknown to the modern household, was the loom, which in the days of home-made fabrics was almost indispensable. The space this ponderous machine occupied in a small cabin made it a serious incumbrance, and hence a period would be devoted to the family weaving, after which the loom could be taken apart and stowed away, unless, as sometimes happened, one had a separate loom-room. The excellence of the work done upon these rude, home-made implements is a matter for wonder now, as one examines preserved specimens. Not only have those blankets, jeans and various cloths a surpassing durability, but some fabrics, such as coverlets and curtains, exhibit a remarkable artistic taste and skill, both in the dyeing of the yarns and the weaving of complicated figures.

Complementary to the loom were the spinning-wheels—a big one for the wool and the familiar little one for the flax. The skilful use of these was a part of the education of every girl, and in the ears of many an old man and woman the resonant hum of it still lingers as the sweet music of a day that is past.