

THE ORDEAL OF PIONEERING¹

Pioneers of the sixties, you have the honor of having laid the foundation for the present prosperity of Martin County, but at what a cost none but us may ever know. Let me illustrate, to give my younger friends something of an idea of the ordeal of pioneering. I have no particular person in mind, but what is true of the characters whose experiences I shall describe can be applied to hundreds who left the scenes of their childhood and came West in an early day.

Picture in your minds, if you will, a young couple in an eastern state who have just taken the marriage vows. They are trying to solve the problem of procuring a home. Their financial circumstances will not permit them to purchase one there. The trades and professions are overcrowded. They have heard that somewhere in the West, Uncle Sam is practically giving away quarter sections of land to actual settlers.

¹ This address was delivered by Mr. Timothy Rowley at a meeting of the Martin County Historical Society in East Chain on August 25, 1929. Though his account of the pioneering process is generalized, it should be noted that it proceeds from an intimate acquaintance with the story of one township. This story Mr. Rowley has told in detail in his pamphlet *East Chain Township, Martin County, Minnesota* (Fairmont, 1929. 12 p.). The author is seventy-three years old. He was born in Kewaunee County, Wisconsin, in 1856. Three years later his parents set forth in a canvas-covered wagon for Minnesota. The family arrived at East Chain on October 8, 1859, after several weeks of journeying, and here Mr. Rowley has resided since, successful as a farmer and through many years active in the civic life of his community. As a younger man, himself a product of the log school house of his community, with the advantage of one term of school in Winnebago, he taught school for fifteen winters in his own district and elsewhere. For forty years he has been a township clerk; for nearly as long he has been a justice of the peace. He is noted in his community as an expert grain stacker. This address is reprinted, with a few unimportant changes, from the *Fairmont Daily Sentinel* for August 31, 1929. Its delivery by Mr. Rowley at East Chain was followed by an ovation in his honor from the audience of more than a thousand people who heard it. *Ed.*

They decide to avail themselves of this opportunity of having a home of their own.

All preparations for the long and tedious journey are completed. Upon the eve of their departure they take one last stroll, arm in arm, around the familiar grounds. Methinks I hear them murmur :

Goodbye old home, sad is my heart
To think that forever tonight we must part.
Weeping I leave, the heart full of pain,
I feel that I never shall see thee again.

With the rising of the morrow's sun a prairie schooner is drawn up before the door. Into it are packed all the earthly belongings of the emigrants. With sad hearts and tearful farewells they enter the vehicle and commence the long, weary march across an almost trackless prairie. They have to ford streams, for there are no cement bridges. They must wallow in mud and mire, for there are no trunk highways.

For days and weeks they pursue their westward course, until late one afternoon a grand scene breaks upon their excited vision. They have reached a country containing three chains of beautiful lakes, running parallel to one another about six miles apart, the banks of which are fringed by groves of hardwood timber. They see the luxuriant prairie grass waving in the sunlight like unto the waves at sea. The prairie is strewn with wild flowers of every hue. Claspings their hands in ecstasy they exclaim, "Eureka! We have found the place we have been looking for."

And so they and their like came from different localities in the East and settled in various parts of what is now Martin County. They selected the quarter sections containing the largest groves situated upon the banks of the lakes and on the streams that flowed from them. Soon all the choicest claims were located. Then began the laying of the foundation. Then began the struggle, not for riches, but for a mere existence. They were more than a hundred miles from a railroad and twenty or thirty miles from any base of supplies. There

was small encouragement to break up much land and plant corn and sow wheat. The blackbirds would get the corn and there was no available market for the wheat. The settlers did, however, break a few acres and plant a little corn, and some of them sowed a few acres of wheat. They all planted patches of potatoes.

Wild game was abundant, and the lakes and streams were full of fish. The settlers could take their guns and in a short time procure all the meat they needed. They could take their fish poles, go to the lakes, and catch all the fish they wanted. There was no game warden to dictate a limit. They could take a sack of corn or a little wheat to the old mill just over the bank or to Swearingen's mill at Lake Wilmont and bring home a small portion of corn meal or flour. In this manner they managed to keep the wolf of hunger from the door.

The sloughs were inhabited by thousands of muskrats. The pioneers could trap them, cure their pelts, and dispose of them to fur buyers, who made frequent trips through the country. From the proceeds they could purchase clothing enough to protect themselves and their families from the icy blasts of the northwest winds. But they must forego all the luxuries of life, very many of the comforts, and nearly all the pleasures that we now enjoy. They were not permitted to hear music like that heard here this afternoon. They were not privileged to hear the music produced by the phonograph or transmitted by the radio. They must be content to listen to an orchestra composed of a thousand blackbirds. There were no other sounds to disturb that vast solitude save the honk of the wild goose, the howl of the wolf, or the wild war whoop of Burt Walker and Jack Simser as they rounded up their herds upon the broad prairie.

Time will not permit me to enumerate all the trials and privations endured by the settlers — of being caught upon the prairie by a blinding blizzard, of all-night battles with prairie fires to protect their homes. . . . Still they were happy. When the Homestead Act became a law and the Civil War

closed, many of the returning soldiers came West and homesteaded claims. Thus the little settlements soon were populated thickly enough to permit the pioneers to get together on a Fourth of July and have a neighborhood picnic. They would erect a rude bowery. And Tuck Sailor, Marion Ganoë, or Amos Jennings would walk to Fairmont, Tenhassen, or East Chain and play for a dance, through the afternoon and evening, in which old and young participated.

Toward the close of the sixties and the beginning of the seventies the terminus of the railroad advanced several miles farther west. The farmers began to raise larger crops and were beginning to enjoy themselves when a dire misfortune befell the county, a misfortune that proved well nigh fatal. One bright day in June, 1873, persons looking toward the sun saw innumerable shining objects floating in the air. They were mistaken for cottonwood seeds. When they came to earth, however, it was discovered that they were Rocky Mountain locusts, or grasshoppers. The "old timers" called them "hoppers," for short. They alighted in countless numbers and in less than a week all hopes for a bountiful harvest were blasted. It seems almost a miracle that the settlers did not become disheartened, abandon their claims, and go back East. Many of them, I imagine, would have done so had not one H. F. Sherman undertaken to plant an English colony here. He had secured the agency for the sale of large tracts of railroad lands and had spent the preceding winter in London, where he had induced several Englishmen to set off for Minnesota to become pioneer farmers. He advised them, on their arrival, to break up the virgin sod and to plant beans, assuring them that there would be a fortune in it. They were a jolly, good-hearted lot, who had much money, but no experience in western farming. The old-timers had much experience, but no money. Our English friends hired settlers with teams to break up hundreds of acres and employed men and boys to plant the beans with old hand planters. When the plants began to grow the "hoppers" took them. Not dismayed, our plucky

friends replanted their fields. The experiment was kept up for four years, until, one day in June, 1877, the "hoppers" disappeared as mysteriously as they had come. By that time the earlier settlers had used the money to purchase clothing and provisions for their destitute families, and their English cousins had the experience.²

The "hoppers" had gone without having deposited the cocoons containing their eggs, and this led the farmers to believe that they were gone for good. The next spring all who could procure seed grain plowed up their devastated fields and put in crops. They were further encouraged when, during the summer, the Milwaukee road extended the line of its southern Minnesota division west from Winnebago through the entire length of the county. It passed through Fairmont and soon the villages of Sherburn, Welcome, and Granada sprang up. The extension of this line supplied a fairly good outlet for the products of the farm. With renewed faith in the future of the county, the wives of the settlers began to write letters to relatives and friends in the East describing the fertility of the soil, the natural resources of the region, and the facilities for stock raising in this county of lakes. Attracted by such letters, men who had a little money to spare were induced to come and invest their surplus capital in farms, with the intention of becoming permanent residents. Settlers streamed in from nearly every state east of the Mississippi and even from beyond the sea — from Great Britain, Germany, Denmark, Norway and Sweden, and other European countries. Then began the building of the structure upon the foundation laid by the old-timers a score of years before. The newer settlers brought with them better methods of farming. They planted groves, erected comfortable buildings, and instituted a system of public drainage.

² Mr. Arthur R. Moro of London, who joined the English colony in Martin County in 1876 and remained there until his return to England in 1883, tells the story of this interesting settlement in an article entitled "The English Colony at Fairmont in the Seventies," published in the issue of the present magazine for June, 1927. See *ante*, 8: 140-149.

When the sloughs were drained the fortifications of the muskrats fell. When the cane-brake marshes went dry the nesting places of the blackbirds were destroyed. School districts were formed and school houses began to dot the entire county. Church spires rose from every neighborhood. Roads and trails that zigzagged around swamps were discontinued and government lines took their place. Thus the structure grew from year to year to its present proportions. And the towns have kept pace with the progress of the county.

When I first saw Fairmont sixty-six years ago it contained three houses and a fort that was occupied by a company of soldiers. Today it is a modern city. The other towns have become thriving villages. Yes, old-timers, your dreams have come true. The pleasant homes that your fancy painted have materialized. You have the satisfaction of seeing your children and grandchildren enjoying the fruits of your toil and perseverance.

We would not care to go through those experiences again. We would not wish that our children should. But we would not forget them for the world and all its gold. The friendships formed in those days death alone can terminate. Characters moulded in those years of sacrifice have produced the high class of citizenship that the county now enjoys. And now today, as we mingle together, the old settlers and the new, while we engage in a hearty handshake, let us not forget to thank God for giving us Martin County.

TIMOTHY ROWLEY

EAST CHAIN LAKES, MINNESOTA



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