

A PIONEER FAMILY OF THE MIDDLE BORDER¹

In 1860 father and mother decided to remove to Minnesota. From their old home at Lyons, Wisconsin, it was a three hundred mile journey to the new location in Minnesota, and there was no railroad west of the Mississippi. Aunt Emily, my mother's younger sister, had preceded us. She wrote that people were beginning to clamor for schools and there were few teachers, so she advised Aunt Mur to come with mother. Teaching school, housework, and sewing were all the business avenues then open to women. It was pretty hard for grandmother. She gave up two daughters courageously, though she had little to encourage her to think that she would see mother again. In those days it was no uncommon thing for a daughter to go west with her husband, and never again see any of her own kin.

One of our two wagons was loaded with the bulk of the household possessions—provisions, tools, and supplies. To it was hitched a handsome span of grey horses. Father drove this wagon. The other had some goods, clothing, bedding, and provisions for the trip, with room reserved for the children to play and sleep back of the seat. A white cover was put on this wagon—prairie schooners they were called later—and mother and Aunt Mur drove the span of old mares that pulled it.

Three days out one of the greys lay down in his harness and died. Father could not afford to replace him, and he

¹This narrative was read by Mr. Victor G. Pickett of Minneapolis at the eighty-fourth annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society on January 16, 1933. It consists of extracts from a letter received by him in 1930 from his sister, Mrs. Ida Pickett Bell. She settled in southern Minnesota in 1860 with her parents, Eli K. and Philena Pickett, who made the journey that she describes from their Wisconsin home in covered wagons. Ten years earlier they had moved to Wisconsin from western New York, traveling by way of the Great Lakes. *Ed.*

therefore traded the remaining grey for a yoke of oxen. They could go fully as fast as the old team, but the change was quite a comedown for father. How very long the days were. We stopped at night as often as possible where the women could have a bed inside, but father preferred to stay with his wagons. One night we stopped at a sort of hotel, and a sewing-machine agent was teaching the landlord's daughter to sew. I remember mother and auntie were very sure a sewing machine was not a practical thing and would not be at all likely to be used by the mass of people. At another hotel was a little girl about my own age with her hair shingled, so mother and auntie thought probably she was idiotic and I was kept away from her.

After we crossed the Mississippi River at McGregor, on a ferry boat with a big wheel, our trials began. Roads were mostly cross-country trails. Many times a wagon mired and father had to unload everything and sometimes go a long distance for a piece of timber strong enough to pry out the wheels. We had camp fires and mother cooked. Sometimes it rained, so we had nothing hot. We walked up the big hills, and as we met teams the constant salutation was "Hurrah for Lincoln."

I can remember how hard it was to sit still so much. The first day of November we drove through the little handful of houses that was called Albert Lea. We had been just a month making this journey. We only stopped to inquire our way to Itasca, where old acquaintances of the family, the Colbys, had preceded us while Minnesota was yet a territory.² What a wonderful thing it was to be so welcomed and to eat at a table! The house was a log cabin with one room below and a loft above. A stove, a cupboard, a bed, a homemade lounge, a drop-leaf table, some benches, and a ladder leading to the loft were its fur-

² Itasca was located three miles northwest of the present site of Albert Lea, on land now occupied by the Wedge Nursery.

nishings. Everything was as neat as hands could make it. The table was set as carefully as might be. How good that dinner was and how many, many, other good times I had in that house! A little girl, only a few months older than I, was there, and the friendship we formed that day has never had a break. Maggie, Libby, and Clara were still at home. Maggie was working in the newspaper office, which was in one corner of the old tavern on the spot where the schoolhouse at Itasca is now. Somewhere in its wooden insides there was also a general store. A very small assortment of goods it must have carried—for I remember that almost everything we used was brought from the river almost a hundred miles away—but the big barrel of whisky under the stairs was never allowed to become empty.

After dinner we started on again, but it was only a three-mile drive this time to the farm where Uncle Smith Skiff had lived for a year. Adjoining it, Aunt Emily and her husband, George Chamberlain, had bought a farm, and they were occupying a log cabin smaller than the Colbys', until they could build a larger one. We left the main road a mile from the house and followed the private trail across the creek. It was on low ground, and father began then what he kept up for forty years at least—execrations on that particular road. I remember perfectly going to the house. Aunt Emily and her family had looked for us for so long that they had left off looking, and they did not see our wagons until we were at the door. There was one window on the same side as the door and cousins Ella and Dora were sitting on the floor playing. The meeting of the three sisters in that lonely country, so far from grandmother, was one of those joyful, tearful meetings that meant so much more than the casual greetings of relatives now who rush across the United States in a few hours and go again in a few hours, feeling confident that they can repeat the performance almost any time they wish to do so.

The fact that five more people were to be cared for in that little place was only a delight to Aunt Emily. Later that same cabin was the receiving house for family after family that came from York state or Wisconsin to make homes in the West. But dear, patient, Aunt Emily made them welcome and comfortable in some wonderful, efficient way.

The day after we arrived was election day. There was very little red tape and no registration at all. The voting place for that neighborhood was at the home of Ole Peterson, a Norwegian, who became a political boss of some importance in Freeborn County. There father and Uncle George deposited their votes for Abraham Lincoln. Only one other vote ever gave father so much satisfaction—that was his first vote, which was cast for Henry Clay.

Father and mother were no hangers-on and immediately father began looking for land. Itasca Prairie was a promising place. The little hamlet of Itasca was looking forward to being the choice of Freeborn County for the county seat. There was a town platted, and between its eastern line and the creek was an "eighty" which looked lovely to a man who had cleared and subdued the woody, rocky land of Cattaraugus County, New York. It was rich prairie land, as level as a floor. There was unlimited pasture all around. There father decided to settle.

It was too cold by that time to build, but father found that Charles Colby had built for himself a new house and wished to sell the two-roomed house he was living in. It had already been moved once to Itasca from a place two or three miles northeast, where a town called Bancroft had been started. There, in the house which father now bought, David Blakely, afterward editor of the *Minneapolis Tribune*, had founded and published for a short time the first newspaper in Freeborn County. One after another of the houses in Bancroft were moved to other places,

until finally none was left to mark the site of the once ambitious village. They were built of oak and were more solid than comfortable.

Father decided to wait until spring to move the house, so we were soon settled in our new home. As the rooms were quite large, he decided to let Aunt Mur have the use of the best room during the day for a schoolroom. There was a fireplace in that room. A table was put in one corner, a bed in another, and benches around the rest of the room. Here gathered as motley a lot of pupils as any story ever chronicled. Young ladies who had left Wisconsin or other states when very young were glad to get a little more instruction. Mary Davis, who was beautiful, shed luster on the room. Libby Colby, Mary Frost, and Frank Blackmer scared Aunt Mur almost out of her wits. They were so grown-up and she was so unconscious of her own ability. She taught several terms at different times and I remember her as a most efficient teacher. There were several grown-up Norwegian boys, anxious to learn. They were not very attractive, but they had been so imbued with the thought that the minister and the school-teacher were to be implicitly obeyed and in no way trifled with, that aunty was quite taken with them as pupils. Ole Stugo later tried to "shine up" to the "schoolma'am."

When Frank Blackmer came to school he had a great pile of books in his arms—books on history, chemistry, philosophy, political economy, and other subjects. Isaac Botsford, a printer from "somewhere back East" who was editor of the *Freeborn County Springs*, was a solemn-looking fellow with a spice of humor in his make-up, and he had sent his devil with these remnants of his eastern schoolbooks and a note to the "schoolma'am" to make his boy behave. Aunty was not quick to perceive some kinds of humor and she was rather upset at the idea that she might be expected to teach subjects of which she had never even heard. Like

many another woman she lived with a joker all her life, yet never learned to recognize a joke when it appeared.

Evenings the family gathered around the fireplace and it seems to me there were very few evenings when there was not company. In the old pioneer days there was a cordiality and companionship that was heart-warming. Father was as full of fun as an egg is of meat. Mother was a comfortable, pleasant housewife, who dispensed doughnuts and pumpkin and mince pies to most appreciative young people. Aunt was very attractive in her quiet way, and as all new countries have a good many bachelors who come to seek adventure or land, or for other reasons, a new girl was something to rejoice in. Stories were told, games played, and now and then a cotillion danced in that little room. Jake Frost was a little younger than aunt, but he worshipped at her shrine. He had a fiddle and the young people danced to his playing and enjoyed it. Years later, I heard him perform on that same fiddle and marveled that he had escaped injury.

Very soon mother and Maria Colby Bickford became good friends and through all the years until Aunt Maria died they helped bear each other's burdens as two great-hearted women can, advising when asked to do so, but never meddling. They were not in the least alike, but their friendship was a beautiful one. Aunt Maria was a worker and a capable woman. She married a man who was generous and warm-hearted, a man who hated injustice and cruelty; and as he had the good sense to recognize his wife's superiority and was proud of it, he let her manage and they thrived. Their home for years was only a one-room log house with a lean-to, but it was another home where people loved to go. "Bunk," as Mr. Bickford was called, was an old-time hunter and trapper. When Vermont got too small for him, he drifted West. When he first came to Minnesota he was always in search of material for a good fight.

and he very often found it. He drank some, as most single men did in those days, but never to excess, and later he became a fighting abstainer.

Very early in the spring of 1861 father moved our house onto the eighty he had bought. It still stands very nearly as he built it then. A new house was built later in front of it, and for years the old house was father's workshop and woodshed.

He went first at the business of starting his farm. He had traded his old team and a ridiculously small amount of money for 160 acres of timbered land between our prairie home and Albert Lea. This was the pride of his heart, for he was after all "of the woods." His children all inherited that love, though none of them ever lived in the real woods.

That year father cut and split material for a "shanghai" fence, which I think was built around twenty acres. "Bunk" helped him break some of the land, and he put in sod corn, turnips, and garden truck the first year. Our folks had provided themselves with cuttings of apple trees, currant and gooseberry bushes, and Lombardy poplars, which father loved. The last I knew, some of the Lombardys and cottonwoods that father planted still survived. Mother had brought lilacs and blush roses, and how they grew in that rich soil! When strawberry time came, we reveled in the wild fruit. Some of the people who came first got homesick and left after they had broken up some land. On this land the wild strawberries grew in profusion, and we with other people took pails and pans and our lunch and stayed sometimes nearly all day picking the sweet, wild berries.

During the first summer our folks were invited to visit two families whom they had known in York state—those of Charles and Daniel Dills, Pennsylvania Dutch in origin. Their quaint expressions made side-splitting fun, and their sound common sense made their advice on meeting the prob-

lems of the new country worth heeding. They did their part in opening Freeborn County and their descendants are among the educators, business men, and other up-to-date, worthwhile townspeople.

In the late summer of 1861, Aunt Mur left us to go back to grandmother in Wisconsin. Mother had become acquainted with the neighbors, and she had Aunt Emily, but it was a grief to us all to give Aunt Mur up. Father had begun to get together a little stock, I don't remember how much, and he planned to increase it as fast as possible. The barns of his home state dwelt in his memory, so he began operations for a barn of his own which should be more comfortable and roomy than the straw stables that most of the neighbors had. But first he made the house comfortable and livable for winter. He plastered it, cased windows and doors, papered and painted it, and made some partitions so we had a guest room and pantry. Then he began on his basement stable. He excavated nearly as much space as was later covered by the big barn. He hauled logs from the woods over the ice and erected crotches to hold the cross timbers. This rail grill he covered with marsh grass and later with straw at threshing time, making a comfortable shelter for his stock.

In 1862 father felt that he could no longer remain at home when duty called him to do his part in putting down the rebellion. Two or three of the Frost boys, both Dills men, and others whom we knew had already gone, and so he fixed things as comfortable as he could for mother and us children and went to Fort Snelling, where he was mustered into Company E, Tenth Minnesota Volunteer Infantry. I was an old child for my years and I believe the sorrow and gloom of that time was as great for me as for any of those who were called upon to give up their loved ones.

Terror was added to grief as the Sioux Indians went on the war path and got to New Ulm only sixty miles away,

and fiendish massacres were told of by fleeing citizens as they passed through Itasca on their way to former homes in the East. Father wrote mother to make the best disposition she could of things, and find some means of transportation to Wisconsin. She left her things with Aunt Emily and other neighbors and went to Shell Rock, as Glenville was then called, expecting to go to the river with a family named Corning. Mrs. Corning was not ready and mother worked very hard helping her, and that with her fear and sorrow undermined her health and she was taken ill with typhoid fever. Uncle George came down after her and got her back as far as Itasca, where she was put into a room of the old hotel. Anyone who would took care of her. We children were taken to Aunt Emily's, where we had as good care as she could give us, and well-cooked foods—potatoes and milk gravy chiefly. But little as we were, we felt it was not home, and we were so scared and homesick it was a wonder we did not get sick too.

The Indian scare became worse. The grown-ups and half-grown-ups took care of mother, and we children were warned to keep close and to report any unusual noise or movement. Father was still at Fort Snelling and he got a short furlough and came to see us. I think that helped mother get better. He arranged with Franklin to take us to the Mississippi River when he took his own wife and little ones there. Mrs. Burnham—Aunt Rushia, as we called her—sat up all one night to make a little waist and a pair of pants trimmed with buttons and braid for Milton.

Finally mother was well enough to go—at least the trip did not kill her. We traveled with our trunks and bundles in an old lumber wagon, with an old team and an oddity for a driver. When we started across the prairie east of Austin, he would call on the women to admire its beauty. Standing up in the wagon, his long, lanky ungraceful figure ought to have inspired smiles, but no one felt very smiling, and as mile after mile was passed he, too, lost his enthusi-

asm, and finally burst out with "Damn the monotony." That got a little laugh from the women. I remember very little of that part of the journey except the monotony.

We crossed the river at McGregor on what seemed to us a floating palace. Mother used to tell long afterwards of walking down the saloon, as the long cabin of the boat was called, and seeing a comfortable looking woman coming toward her smiling. She smiled and, as they met, put out her hand in greeting and touched a mirror, probably the largest she had ever seen. Mother had the good sense never to feel humiliated at her lack of knowledge of things she could not have known, but laughed as heartily as she would have at anyone else. I remember nothing more of the trip until we got to the dear familiar little village of Lyons. Mother was not idle after we got there. So many men were gone that she did such work as husking corn and even digging potatoes, besides house-cleaning and like work.

After his service in the Indian war, father got a furlough of thirty days. It was doubly hard to see him go again, as we realized it was to real warfare. In the spring of 1865 it seemed likely that the war would end and the soldiers be discharged, so mother decided to go back to Minnesota and have a home ready for father to come to. Aunt Mur again decided to go with us, but she was obliged to go ahead in order to get the school for the summer. Mother and Milton and I went to Brownsville on the river, where we were met by Mr. Monroe with a big wagon and then taken to his home in Fillmore County. There we were kept just as long as mother would stay. When mother would stay no longer Uncle Martin brought us to Itasca. I remember how awful our home looked. Movers had used the house and stable. They had burned up most of the fence for fuel, had knocked the plastering off the walls, and had broken windows. Weeds were so high where our neat front yard had been that we could hardly see the house. All the shubbery was killed and mother had to

pay twenty-five dollars that fall to get the stable cleaned and repaired so it could be used. All the earlier two years' work seemed worse than wasted. But mother got some of the neighbors to help and before father got home we were quite comfortably settled.

Itasca at that time had half a dozen families and a few living near by who also considered that they belonged to Itasca. The Colby family I have mentioned. The son, Charles, really was the earliest settler there and he coaxed his sisters Maria, Mary Ann, and Sarah Jane to come there with him while Minnesota was still a territory and the redskins were holding their revels on the banks of Fountain Lake. Colby was an impractical dreamer, but he started things which other people found it to their interest to follow up. He was the most enthusiastic boomer for Itasca. He first built the house where his parents lived, then he built the one father bought, then the house known as the "Round House" a queer octagon-shaped building with a hollow wall filled with sawdust. This wall was expected to keep the house very warm, but it only succeeded in making it very dirty and alive with bugs of various kinds. Then he built a fairly comfortable house which he moved into in order to let us have the old one.

Another boomer was Dr. Alfred Burnham, a bright, reckless young physician who had come from Buffalo with his young wife about the time Charles Colby came. He gathered around him a crowd of adventurers and there were wild stories of gambling and drinking which were probably much overdrawn but which surely had some foundation in fact. His wife was as daring as she was beautiful. My mother found her a warm-hearted, helpful friend. Burnham's satellite, an odd, uncouth man named Franklin, and Uncle Dunbar, as every one called him, who kept the post office and a little store just opposite our house, were the town characters.

Ole Stugo lived opposite the Colbys. He was a lime

burner. I remember how fascinating it was to gaze into the fiery mass when he opened the furnace door to put in fuel. Once he said to me, "Dat looks yust like Hell." I had been brought up a Universalist (I was eight years old), and I promptly told him I had heard of such a place but had no faith in it. Some one told about my remark. A cousin of my mother's got hold of it, and I went on record in the New Covenant as a good Universalist.

Maria Colby and "Bunk," her husband, lived a little way west of the town, but they belonged to it, as they had lived there for several years before we got there. Mary Ann Colby Hurd was quiet like her mother. She was an exquisitely neat housekeeper and was worried to death lest something happen to baby George, then a year old. Dan Hurd, her husband, was twenty years her senior.

Mr. Frost, who lived north of Itasca, always had a hobby, and he rode it hard, whether it was Spiritualism or what not. In a voice that fairly made the windows rattle he insisted on presenting his proofs of whatever he was interested in, which made him rather dreaded. But his wife, Margaret, was a splendid cook, a motherly, hospitable soul who made their house a most comfortable place to visit. Botsford, the printer before mentioned, E. D. Hopkins, called generally Charlie Hop, and Mr. Peck, bachelors, made up the rest of the community.

All were interested in getting the county seat away from Albert Lea. That village, however, had in the fall of 1865 been reinforced by D. G. Parker, a lawyer, Dr. Wedge, a young physician, William Morin, and Augustus Armstrong, who, among them, had much ability, money, and consequently more influence in the county than the people of Itasca, and so Albert Lea won out. There was no chance for two towns to exist so close together, so Itasca died a natural death. We could not even keep our name for the post office, as there was already an Itasca farther north.

The above roughly pictures the Itasca neighborhood in

the spring of 1865. As I have told you, mother had come back to Itasca that spring to get the home in readiness for father's anticipated return from the war. Finally the war ended, but months elapsed before mustering out could be completed and soldiers released. Letters from father could give no prospective date for his homecoming. Few newspapers reached us those days. We knew that father's regiment had returned to Fort Snelling via the Mississippi River, but mother could obtain no information as to when father might be expected home.

One night just after dusk she saw a man in an officer's uniform walking rapidly up the path to the house. She rushed to meet him and before she could be stopped threw her arms about him. But it was not father. It was Dr. Burnham just returned, who came to tell mother that father was helping in the mustering out and would be detained still a little longer. I think that her tears of disappointment were duplicated on the messenger's face, for that was a time when sympathy ran deep and all realized the torture of the long waiting. When father finally did come in the early fall his whitened hair and dim eyes had changed him so much that I felt for a long time that he was not the same father who went away. But he and mother were strong, energetic, and courageous. They began anew the labor of building their home. They worked together in harmony, gradually overcame the handicaps which the war had imposed, kept their fireside bright, and made their lives worth while.

IDA PICKETT BELL

MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA



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