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SOME FRONTIER WORDS AND PHRASES¹

WORDS, ACCENTS, AND PRONUNCIATIONS used by pioneers whose ancestors talked and wrote the old Yankee version of the English language in the New England hills and along the narrow winding streams of the East were undoubtedly modified in the West. There the settlers met with and adjusted themselves to new living and working conditions, material and otherwise, met and associated with settlers from many sections of the Old and New Worlds, and often lived in communities that lacked schools and churches. I say the old New England English, for one may now travel for a week through Yankeeland without hearing a half-dozen people speak the language as their grandparents did back in the sixties of the last century. But I shall not attempt here to explain the how or why of that. Many words and phrases and practically all the accent or dialect pronunciations have passed into oblivion. But in the late sixties and the seventies they were still commonly used by New Englanders, New Yorkers, and other native Americans who settled in southern Minnesota. A few words still have a place in the vocabularies of the people, and some of these words are still pronounced in the old way, as "crick" for

¹ Mr. Davis is the author of a manuscript volume of reminiscences in which he tells of his life and observations in southern Minnesota. The present article constitutes one section of this manuscript. Another, on frontier medical and sanitary practices, will be published in a future issue of this magazine. His narrative includes vivid accounts of a covered-wagon journey from Wisconsin to Minnesota in 1866, of living conditions on a prairie claim, of frontier amusements, and of other aspects of Minnesota pioneer life. *Ed.*

"creek," "ant" for "aunt," "laff" for "laugh," and the like.

Among the natives—the Yankees and near Yankees—many very expressive words and phrases were used in common conversation. These were well understood by the natives themselves, but their purport was often lost, at first, on the foreigners, many of whom never came to understand them all. If a speaker wished to convey the idea that another person was naturally dull, he called him a "numb-skull"; if he was bright enough naturally, but had been easily fooled by someone, he was a "chump." If the speaker harbored more or less ill will against another, the latter "didn't know enough to carry guts to a bear," he "didn't know as much as a sore foot," he was a "saphead," he "didn't have the gumption of a louse," he "hadn't as much sense as a farrow cow," he was a "blockhead," a "stick-in-the-mud," a "reg'lar toby's [*donkey's*] hind leg," "no great scratch," or maybe a "mullet head." It might also have been said that he "hasn't got sense enough to last 'im over night," or that he "wasn't fit fer a taller drag."

A stingy person was "tight as the bark to a tree," an "old miser," or a "skinflint." A woman would refer to another whom she did not like or about whom she had heard derogatory stories as a "hussy" or a "hen hussy." If the reference was to a man, he might be called an "old blatherskite," a "scallawag," a "hen granny," or some other scorching epithet. Whichever expression was used would usually be preceded by "darn" or an equally descriptive adjective.

Some common expressions carried their meanings more or less clearly and openly, notwithstanding idiomatic obscurity in the form, as "scarce as hens' teeth." "The jumping off place" was used to describe a place about as far west as the women wanted to go. The "bat's end o' the world," "let the cat out o' the bag," "he'll stick like a dog to a root," "run Big Fraid, Little Fraid's after ye,"

“he’s plannin’ some sculduggery,” “she’s made ’er bed an’ now she’s got tuh lay in it,” “out o’ the fryin’ pan intuh the fire,” “full o’ gimp an’ gumption,” “ye’re as much mistaken as if ye’d burnt yer shirt,” “as useless as a last year’s bird’s nest,” “he got comeup-with,” “I’ll knock ’im intuh the middle o’ next week,” “don’t open yer yawp,” “hitting two birds with one stone,” “jealous pated,” “go tuh grass,” “go tuh pot an’ see the kittle bile,” “birds of a feather flock together,” “looks like he’s been drawn through a knothole,” “he makes a mountain out of a molehill,” “stay on yer own side o’ the dish,” “give ’im an E an’ he’ll take an Ell,” “root hog ’er die,” “you’ve got tuh either fish ’er cut bait,” “the more haste the less speed,” “between the devil an’ the deep sea,” “give the devil his due,” “ye might as well eat the devil as drink his broth,” “smart as a whip,” and “love’ll go where it’s sent” were sayings frequently used by the pioneers.

How wonderfully expressive were the following: “It smells strong enough to knock an ox down,” “ye’re a dreadful knowin’ critter,” “now I’m in a peck o’ half bushels,” “I’ll bust yer biler,” “going at a hen canter,” “stands to reason,” “the pesky thing is all out o’ kilter,” “like a thousand’ o’ brick,” “tough as a biled owl,” “more than ye c’n shake a stick at,” “licketty split,” “till ye’re blue in the face,” “crazy as a bedbug,” “called him everything he could lay his tongue to,” “right hand runnin’,” “it ain’t what it’s cracked up tuh be,” “can’t git head nor tail to it,” “as cunnin’ as a red pig a runnin’,” “it’s as easy as fallin’ off a log,” “if ye don’t like it ye c’n lump it,” “blind as a bat,” “full of the old Harry,” “I’ll make ’im scratch gravel,” “I wish he was in hell with his back broke,” “hell-bent fer ’lection,” “let ’er rip,” and “skeedaddle.” If a neighbor needed help in case of sickness or trouble, the settlers said that “we’ll all clap to and help ’im out.” “I can’t guttle it down” or “I can’t muckle it” were expressions for “I can’t eat it.” “I want tuh know” expressed

wonder or incredulity. If two men wanted to settle a mutual running account without bothering to look up books or figures they would "jump accounts"—that is, call it even.

And what modern expressions are capable of more carrying power than these: "as big as all out doors and part in the house," "like all possessed," "as near as ye c'n put yer eye out," "that can't hold a candle tuh mine," "quick as a cat ever licked 'er ear," "that's no allkillin' matter," "that's a whopper [*a big lie*]," "he'll turn up missin'," "don't buy a pig in a poke" and "mind yer p's an' q's"? Uncouth? Yes, perhaps. But what depths of possible meaning these expressions imply and what a wide range of application they have!

The following did very well for terse and meaningful character descriptions: "narrer contracted," "he ain't got no backbone," "he thinks he's the biggest toad in the puddle," "crooked as a ram's horn," "he c'n lie faster than a horse c'n trot," "he thinks he's a little god and a half," "he's got enough brass in his face tuh make a ten-pail kettle," "they're the offscourin's o' the earth," "as full of the devil as an egg is full o' meat," "he's a reg'lar bigbug," "thinks he's some punkins," "he's a wolf in sheep's clothing," "dumbhead," "old rip," "terror tuh snakes," "back-biter," "half baked," and "he don't know enough tuh ache."

And here are more idioms and often-used words and phrases that added rugged richness to the ordinary conversation of the pioneers: "Homely as a hedge fence," "like all git out," "one boy is half a man, two boys no man at all," "cutting up didoes," "bugbear," "boogaboo," "brat," "three jerks of a cat's tail," "I like the cut of his jib," "it ain't tuh be sneezed at," "strain at a gnat an' swaller a saw-mill," "crack o' doom," "dark as a nigger's pocket," "busy as a bee in a tar bucket," "it rained pitchforks," "beller

like a bay steer," "if wishers had horses beggars might ride," "sure as ye're a foot high," "hustle yer boots," "he'll go up like a rocket an' come down like a stick," "run like a heeter," "afoot an' alone," "ye can't make a whistle out of a pig's tail," "every which way," "unbeknown," "by good rights," "the hull kit an' caboodle of 'em," "all cluttered up," "don't git on yer ear," "don't git yer dander up," and "the hull shootin' match."

If one did a thing with more than ordinary energy, it was said that he went at it with "hammer an' tongs"; he would "spruce up" when getting ready to go to a party or to go courting; he was "off the first four miles" if he was liable to be absent when needed; he was said to "feel his oats" if he thought too much of himself; and when he began to feel at home in a place, he was said to be "wonted." One often spoke of a boy as a "little bugger," though the expression "stiff-necked old bugger" also was common. To "go snucks" was to go into partnership. To "hoof it" was to walk, but if one walked a considerable distance and someone asked how he came, he would say that he "rode shank's mare." To be "tight" was to be drunk. One spoke of a "hunk" of bread or cake. A "little cutup" was a lively child, and a "flutterbudget" was a lively or nervous person. "They're in cahoots" was said of people who were thought to be scheming to do something disliked by the speaker. "Got a hen on" was said of a person planning something he did not yet wish to discuss or reveal. If a person died it was reported that he had "kicked the bucket." If a person entered or left a house unceremoniously he "boused" in or out. "Scram" has replaced the old word "git" for "get out" or "go away." Here is a mother's advice to her grown boys—perhaps hard to take, but well meant: "Don't tie yer love tuh any girl's apern strings till ye know ye c'n git 'er." But if a woman wanted her daughter to "keep company" with John Doe, she said:

"Why don't ye set yer cap fer Johnny, he'd make a good pervider."

The following expressions were often used as expletives by those who for some reason did not want to swear: "the devil an' Tom Walker," "gosh all fishhooks" "so help me jumping John Rogers," "jumping Aunt Hannah," "Land o' Goshen," and "by cracky." "In all my born days" and "for land sakes alive" were used chiefly by women for emphasis, and "not by a jugful," "what in Sam Hill" or "what the Sam Hill," and "Zounds an' garters," by men.

If an undesirable person or family left the neighborhood, their departure was described as "good riddance tuh bad rubbish." It was often said that there was a "nigger in the wood pile" or "the devil's in 'im as big as a wood-chuck," or "she'll do it if the devil stands tuh the door." "All around Robin Hood's barn" was expressive as covering a good deal more territory than was necessary or truthful.

What these words and idiomatic expressions lacked in grace and delicacy was made up for in stark expressiveness. The pioneers who used them in everyday conversation did so very often and on many diverse occasions, giving them the shades of meaning demanded by the circumstances.

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