

SOME FRONTIER INSTITUTIONS¹

UNTIL THE PRESENT CIVILIZATION has passed away and the country again becomes the habitat of wolves and other dwellers of a wilderness plain, if that ever happens, and new attempts are made by some sturdy remnants of civilized man to reconquer the wilderness and carve out new homes for themselves and their children, no one can ever again experience the difficulties and hardships that were cheerfully met and overcome by the early pioneers of the old Northwest. This is so because, even if there were like spots on the earth to pioneer, no one wishing to settle there could get away from the older settlements without taking with him many conveniences, now considered necessities, which in pioneer days did not even exist. For this reason, I think the recalling and recording of pioneering experiences, conditions, and institutions, before they all are enveloped in the haze of tradition, is worth while, especially when one considers the fast gait at which we are now going.

A backward glance at such pioneer institutions as the country store, the blacksmith shop, the country school, the lyceum or debating school, the early country church, and the like, gives us an enlightening view of the lives and activities of the men and women who spent their time and energies preparing this country for the peaceful occupancy and support of later generations. They were the visible evidences of a comparatively primitive civilization.

The country store, as I remember it, was usually a one-and-a-half story frame building with a false front. The upper part was divided into rooms and occupied by the storekeeper and his family as living quarters. On entering the store through the front double door one would likely see a counter

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on each side of a long room, a big cast-iron, wood-burning box heater near the middle, and a long table behind the stove. There was room for passing, however, on all sides of the stove. Around it, the men of the community discussed politics, religion, history, crops, livestock, neighborhood gossip, and the events, causes, and results of the then recent Civil War. Nothing was avoided and no subject escaped scathing condemnation or warm commendation except the personal or family affairs of some one present.

Both sides of the big room that formed the store were filled with crude but serviceable shelves set against the walls. The stock consisted of a little of everything that the new settlers needed or could use, from tea, coffee, and sugar, to log chains, rope, and scatter-guns. The shelves on one side of the store were filled with bolts of dry goods, mostly flannels, calicoes, muslins, and other dress goods of the period—for women usually made their own dresses—and pasteboard boxes containing small articles of dry goods. The counter on that side also was piled high with bolts of cotton goods overflowing from the shelves, with perhaps stacks of horse blankets and wheat sacks, leaving room on the counter only for measuring and wrapping. Presiding at this counter one might see the wife of the proprietor or possibly her pretty daughter.

On the other side of the room was the grocery section with its more or less orderly arrangement of glass jars, boxes, packages, and so forth, and, toward the rear, a smaller section given over to frontier necessities in the hardware and related lines. Here were articles ranging all the way from gimlets to log chains and steel teeth for harrows. The farmers made their own harrows, which they called "drags." On the grocery counter were a scale or two, a big round cheese box containing the unsold portion of a fat, yellow cheese, and last, but not, perhaps, least, a small open box of smoking tobacco and one of matches, for the free use of customers and loungers. With other items, all these things were arranged

to suit the convenience and taste of the proprietor, who always met one with a friendly greeting. On the middle table were piled all goods for which no other handy place could be found. The salt, cracker, and sugar barrels were placed as near the hand of the grocer behind the counter as space permitted. In a convenient corner stood the inevitable nail keg with a bundle of hickory ax helves sticking up for inspection.

Among the things carried in stock by the pioneer storekeepers that one does not see in stores nowadays were great barrels or hogsheads of coarse, dark brown, luscious looking sugar, more tempting to youngsters than candy. There were three grades of sugar besides brown sugar. These were "coffee A," which was white but not granulated; "coffee B," which was of a very light yellowish tint; and "coffee C," which was slightly darker, but was still not classed as brown sugar. All three grades were used for sweetening coffee and tea and for fancy cooking. The first, which was the purest and most expensive, was used in tea and coffee by those who could afford it. In most country stores also there were barrels of "New Orleans" molasses, green coffee berries in bulk, slates, candle molds, perhaps a cradle or two for cutting grain, powder and shot with percussion caps, white clay pipes, ox yokes and bows, hoarhound candy, dried apples, and even bustles and fine-tooth combs, which the youngsters called "Jerusalem overtakers." The country stores received eggs and furs in season from the farmers, always paying in trade. The eggs were packed in barrels with oats and were shipped directly or indirectly to St. Paul by team or boat.

Next in importance to the country store in the economic life of the pioneers was the blacksmith shop. Its erection followed closely upon that of the first store in a new community, and it was usually located at a central point. The blacksmith shop was nearly always built of rough boards placed perpendicularly and nailed around the sides and ends of a skeleton frame of two-by-fours. The cracks were covered with narrow thin boards or battens. The roof was con-

structed in the same way as the walls. After the shop was equipped with a rough handmade forge, a tub or a half barrel filled with water, a few tools, some of which were undoubtedly homemade, a hand bellows, and a small quantity of charcoal, the sturdy blacksmith was ready to make the sparks fly and to become a necessity in the community. Soon a small stock of unfinished horseshoes, iron rods of different sizes and lengths, and narrow strips of flat steel or iron would accumulate on overhead braces or in corners, while odds and ends of broken or worn-out farm tools and machinery would find rest in what seemed confusion in likely and unlikely places on the floor and the walls. The blacksmith was not only the shoer of horses and oxen, but he was the all-around tinker in iron and the master machinist for the entire neighborhood or territory tributary to the store. And how the boys admired his sweating, hairy arms and wondered at the strength of his smutty, bulging muscles!

My father used to tell the story of two Germans who, finding the blacksmith's shop closed, went to his home, their needs being urgent. A loud knocking brought a woman to the door in short order. Then the man nearest the door said, after a gruff greeting: "Ish der schmidt in?" The lady hesitated, not on the instant understanding. But the other man could not wait for further awkward explanation. He grabbed his companion by the shoulder and pulled him back with: "Let some von talk vat can talk. Ish der blackschmidt shop in der house?"

Turning from the purely material phases of pioneer life, the next institution of primary importance in the lives of the early settlers was the public school. The organization of school districts with regular school meetings followed closely on the organization of townships. These two local organizations have proved worthy cornerstones of the American form of government by the people — not always ideal, perhaps, but always "of the people." Both these quasi-municipal organizations were perfected as soon as conditions made such

action possible. Although many of the early settlers had little or no schooling, they were very anxious that their children should have the advantages of at least a common school education.

In or near timbered sections, the first schoolhouses were built of logs, even in the small villages. Out on the open prairie they were nearly always constructed of lumber. Both types were one-story, one-room affairs. Often classes met in them before they were finished, when the rafters and the studding were still exposed and the youngsters could climb and cut capers on them during intermissions.

Seats and desks were made by a neighborhood carpenter or handy man. He used wide, inch-thick, softwood boards smoothed and jointed with a jack plane for this equipment, and for the teacher's table, which usually had one drawer. Sometimes a long wide table and long benches were used instead of seats and desks. The girls sat on one side and the boys on the other — a rather pleasant arrangement for some of the older pupils, who were often interested in things other than "book larnin'." There were no dictionaries, no globe maps, no cyclopedias, no libraries, no paper tablets, no lead pencils. The teacher was supposed to know all the definitions of all the words used in the school or in its books, and to be able to answer all questions relating to geography, history, and other subjects that might come up in the course of the daily exercises or might be asked by any of the sponsors of the school. Slates and slate pencils were used for writing and "figuring," although the older pupils sometimes had pens and ink and copy books with which to learn to write by the Spencerian system. Often two pupils were obliged to study from one book, sometimes at the same time, sometimes not. A homemade blackboard, three and a half by four feet, often answered all the purposes later fulfilled by a blackboard extending clear across one end of the room. The teacher's program, if she had one, was usually written and nailed or hung on the wall.

Ventilation was obtained by opening doors or windows or both. Water for drinking purposes was carried by the larger boys, and sometimes the girls, from the nearest farmhouse, which was rarely less than half a mile away. Two pupils usually went for water, carrying the pail between them. All pupils went to school with dinner pails or "buckets," as some called them. In winter the schoolrooms were heated with large cast-iron wood-burning box stoves. The teachers were expected to start and tend the fires and to sweep the floors.

The first school terms were three months long, and they were held in the summer. Later winter terms of from three to five months were provided in some districts, in addition to the summer terms. Attendance was often irregular, for many of the children had to assist with farm work and cattle herding. Pupils ranged all the way from five to twenty years in age. All grades, from the "A B C class" up, were included. Most subjects now taught in the eighth grade were included in the curriculum, and in many of the country schools some high school subjects were taken up by pupils who were sufficiently advanced and ambitious. In many districts, however, grammar was frowned upon by pioneers who thought that studying it was a waste of valuable time. Special attention, however, was given to what the teachers called "language lessons," and these did not seem to arouse adverse criticism. Home study was not only encouraged, but insisted upon, as much for its habit-forming tendency and influence as for the extra knowledge that could be acquired. One thing always insisted upon in the early schools was thoroughness. At the beginning of each term, the work of the previous term was reviewed before new work was taken up. Monthly reviews were also a regular thing in most schools. No child was allowed to pass over assigned lessons or parts of them without understanding them. Mental arithmetic was on all programs. This subject was expected to cultivate the pupils' reasoning powers, memory, and ability to think and speak on their feet, as the whole class was required to

stand all through such a recitation. Moral precepts, hints, and illustrations were worked in by the teacher as occasion permitted, but no religious or sectarian teaching of any kind was allowed.

Teachers were scarce. Men over eighteen years of age and girls past sixteen were eligible to teach so far as age was concerned. Three grades of teachers' certificates were issued by the county superintendents of schools. In case of great need, a superintendent sometimes issued what was called a "permit" to an applicant who had not been able to pass the regular examinations—which were usually very thorough—but who was considered competent to teach in a given district. All teachers, however, had to be of good moral character and habits, and they were expected to be capable of exercising an influence for good over the children and in the district.

Some pioneer teachers were expected to "board around" with families who were sending children to the schools in which they taught. Fleas were common pests in every frontier home and very much a nuisance in homes where nothing was done to exterminate them. But it was great fun for the youngsters to watch, surreptitiously of course, while the teacher was trying her best to hear a class recite and scratch for fleas at the same time. Later, sometime in the 1870's, I think, the fleas disappeared completely. Their going, so far as I know, was never satisfactorily explained.

Just as important as book learning in the minds of the sponsors of the pioneer school were the discipline and the mental and moral training that the pupils were expected to receive. Great stress was laid upon a thorough understanding of the fundamentals of learning and on original thinking. Children were encouraged to work out their problems, so far as possible, with a minimum of outside help, though teachers, of course, led them into logical channels of thinking. Teachers were expected to exercise authority and control over the children while going to and from the school as well as during

school hours, and this authority involved the right and the duty of administering corporal punishment within reason and with no greater restraint than the law and reason imposed upon the parents. In most schools there was a noticeable atmosphere of reality, of hunger for learning, an earnest determination to make the best of the opportunities afforded.

One hears many jibes at the expense of the old country schools and the teachers who trudged through mud and storms of rain and sleet and snow to keep them. But one only has to hear the life stories of some of the men and women who have been building Minnesota during the last seventy years to be convinced that a great majority of them received the foundations of their educations and training in the little, thorough-going country school.

The country schoolhouse soon came to be used for dances, political and religious meetings, and social gatherings. Spelling and debating schools, also called lyceums, seemed to come as a natural result of the public school spirit. Both always held their meetings in the late fall and winter months. The older students joined with the men and women of the neighborhood in debating and other exercises, and often the older members of a community took part in the spelling matches. These meetings were not confined to single school districts, but all who lived within easy driving distance and wished to attend were welcome. The women usually contributed readings, recitations, and songs to the lyceum programs. Committees proposed the questions for debate and arranged the programs. Judges selected from the audiences decided which side had the best of the arguments. Critics who were expected to call attention to mistakes in pronunciation, manner of delivery, and the like, also were appointed. Debates were held on various subjects, though religious and political questions were excluded. All debates were handled with energy and sincerity. Besides bringing old and young of all political and religious beliefs together on common ground, these meetings exerted a profound influence upon the meth-

ods of thinking, the language, and the social instincts of the pioneers. Perhaps no other institution could have supplied similar benefits for the heterogeneous population of a new state. Lyceums and spelling matches were as popular and important in the life of small villages as in that of the country. Here also they helped to provide a much needed balance in the community life of the villagers.

The religious spirit of the early pioneers was kept alive, and in some localities was fanned into a flame sufficiently strong to support organizations, by missionaries, itinerant preachers, and "exhorters." Some of these religious leaders took claims and supported themselves and their families while extending their religious work. A few even worked by the day during the harvest and at other times when the settlers were especially busy. Meetings were held in private homes at first, and later in tents and schoolhouses. The early home missionaries were of a self-sacrificing type. They prepared the way for the later church organizations, which soon began to spring up in convenient places throughout the new country. The earliest meetings were entirely undenominational, so far as Protestantism was concerned. Even the evangelists who presided over "revivals" and "protracted meetings" held in scattered churches and schoolhouses and tents often avoided divulging their church affiliations and made every effort to avoid anything that might tend to split the community into religious groups. As a result, all Protestants in a community usually joined in the first church organizations.

The organization of Protestant churches under separate sectarian names did not come until after the country districts were comparatively well settled. The Catholic and Lutheran denominations were usually the first to organize permanently and build churches. Many church organizations established early in rural districts are still very active. As the villages grew, however, they took a heavy toll from the small organizations in contiguous territory, and many near-by

church buildings were abandoned or moved into the towns, and the communicants were absorbed into more centrally located societies.

Of the frontier institutions herein mentioned, perhaps the church organizations have suffered the least from changing times and conditions inevitable in newly settled and constantly growing communities. The spelling schools and lyceums, for all the good they did, are now only memories. The old country stores are a thing of the past, except perhaps in a few outlying districts, where they are greatly modified. The blacksmith shop as it once functioned is to be found only here and there, if at all, in very small villages, and then it is very much changed both in structure and equipment. But the church, as an institution, has continued to build up its membership and its structures as the population increased and prosperity came to its congregations.

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SLEEPY EYE, MINNESOTA



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