

WILDERNESS MARTHAS¹

The housewife's lot has never been an heroic one. Who has written epics on making beds or sweeping floors? Even historians, though often charged with too great attention to economic factors, have had little to say regarding the methods of operating that interesting economic unit, the family. If implements such as spinning wheels, cradles, and candle moulds had not become popular as objects of art, how should we of today know anything of the way in which colonial housewives managed their homes?

Yet there have been periods in the development of the American frontier when the housewife's lot was neither humdrum nor unromantic. One of these was during the thirties and forties when the edge of the fur-trader's frontier was to be found in northern Michigan, in Wisconsin, and in Minnesota. There the white woman had not ventured unless she were the wife of a missionary; there half-breed wives and mothers graced the traders' and missionaries' log houses on countless streams and lakes. Of these women reliable and detailed records have been preserved. The reason for this abundance of data lies in the fact that the missionaries and their wives were intrigued by the novel sights in their chosen fields and were accustomed to write of them in their letters and diaries. From these documents the following sketch of pioneer women has been constructed. Though it tells of but three women, it is representative of activities and customs of many others.²

¹ A paper read at the seventy-eighth annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society on January 17, 1927. *Ed.*

² The chief sources from which the data in this account have been derived are the manuscript letters and diaries of missionaries. All of these papers may be found, either as originals or as copies, in the manuscript collection of the Minnesota Historical Society. A large proportion of the letters are copies of the missionaries' correspondence with the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in Boston, which

The period was one of color and picturesqueness in this region about the upper Great Lakes. The fur trade was still practically the only material lure to white men; and the Indians still hunted in the winter, migrated to their sugar bushes in the spring, gathered wild rice in the late summer, and fished in the autumn. From her cabin door the housewife looked out over the water to watch her neighbors pass: blanketed Chippewa in birch canoes passing silently in pursuit of their traditional enemies, the Sioux; *voyageurs* in blue capotes and red, feather-decked caps speeding past with voices ringing out over the waters in the strains of *A la claire fontaine* or other folksongs from the valley of the Loire in the valorous days of Henri Quatre; and zealous youths from New England, Austria, and Switzerland following in their wake with faces aglow at the prospects of thousands of souls to be saved for the kingdom of God.

Into such scenes as these Hester Crooks Boutwell was brought as a bride in the fall of 1834. She was the daughter of a Chippewa half-breed woman and Ramsay Crooks, a prominent fur-trader and business man of Mackinac and the city of New York. Little is known of her early years except that she was born on Drummond Island in Lake Huron on May 30, 1817, and was well educated at her father's expense at the mission school at Mackinac. She has been described as a "woman of tall and commanding figure, her black hair and eyes indicating her Indian origin. She was a fluent conversationalist, and careful and tidy in her personal appearance."³

After the completion of her studies in the mission school, she acted as assistant to Miss Chapelle, one of the teachers,

sent out many of the mission workers. Copies of the diaries of Edmund F. Ely and his wife and of William Thurston Boutwell have been drawn upon to supply data on Mrs. Ely and Mrs. Boutwell. One letter in the papers of Henry H. Sibley, to whom Mrs. Frederick Ayer wrote on May 2, 1835, concerning Mrs. Boutwell's culinary skill, is quoted.

³ William H. C. Folsom, *Fifty Years in the Northwest*, 276 (St. Paul, 1888).

and in 1833 she went to Yellow Lake, in western Wisconsin, with the family of the missionary, Frederick Ayer. Here her work was to teach the "infant school," and a contemporary letter from Ayer states that she was "well fitted to teach on this plan." She was not to remain long, however, in this mission teaching little Chippewa. A young Easterner by the name of William Thurston Boutwell had been sent in 1833 by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions as a missionary to the notorious Pillager band of Chippewa Indians at Leech Lake in what is now northern Minnesota. Earlier he had lived for a time at Mackinac, where he had been much interested in the mission, and here he must have become fairly well acquainted with Hester. At any rate, off on the shores of Leech Lake his thoughts soon turned toward her. His own words taken from a letter of January 23, 1835, tell the story of his unusual courtship better than any paraphrase could:

To the eye of an Ind. nothing looks permanent until he sees the man come who is married & he sees him build his house.

I was willing to return alone. But experience had taught me, that to reside in a traders family, however I might be called a missionary, yet it was impossible to remove the impression from the Inds. mind, that I was interested in the trade.

To build me a cottage & live alone, I could not live above suspicion, from the fact that single men, clerks in the Company's employ, who do so at their wintering posts, are in the habit of keeping a mistress. . . .

In view of all those circumstances, what was my duty? In brief I must tell you, after a prayerful consideration of the subject, what I did. I cast my [eye] over this barren desolate land, & asked, is there a helper? Instead of going into the first lodge I should chance to fall upon & throwing down my blanket, Prov[idence] directed me to send a dispatch 3 days march across the wilderness to Yellow Lake with proposals to Miss Hester Crooks. The seventh day the messenger brought me an affirmative & the next day I packed up my effects, swung my pack & marched. The fourth day, Sept. 1st at 4 A.M. I arrived at Y. Lake. I had no time to loiter. Embarked the same day & started for Fond du Lac, wher[e] we arrived on the 11th. Here Br[other]

Hall met us & on the same eve. united us in the indissoluble & holy bonds. Left F. D. Lac the next day, & arrived at this place [*Leech Lake*] Oct. 9th, 39 days from Y. Lake.

One longs to have been at Yellow Lake to witness the surprise and flurry of the half-breed girl when Boutwell's wholly unexpected letter was received.

Boutwell kept a diary in which he describes this wedding trip to Leech Lake by way of the St. Louis River, Sandy Lake, and the Mississippi. It was an arduous journey by birch canoe, with execrable portages where "My dear Hester, like a true heart, followed me through mud and water half-leg deep" encumbered "with a few small cooking utensils." And what fine abode for a bride did she find at the end of the journey? A bark lodge for seven weeks! Then the new house was ready for occupancy. Boutwell, in his diary of December 2, 1834, describes it: "Quit my bark lodge, today, for a log mud-walled cottage. This is a palace to me, though I have neither chair, stove, table, or bed-stead. . . . Our windows, which are deer-skins, admit a very imperfect light, scarcely sufficient to enable one to read. One bed and table, and a mat, spread on the floor."

But though the youthful bride may have found imperfect accommodations, she discovered that her neighbors were deeply interested in her. On October 9, 1834, Boutwell confided to his diary: "My wife, I find, is no small curiosity to this people, though one of their kindred, according to the flesh. Her manners and dress being that of an American woman, which most of the number never saw, excites the stare and gaze of all, young and old, male and female."

Here for almost a year Hester lived, cooking for herself and her husband, performing other household duties, visiting the Indians, and endeavoring to teach the children the rudiments of reading and writing and the basic principles of Christianity. Fish, wild rice, and Indian corn were the Boutwells' chief foods, and probably they had only two meals a day, as was the custom throughout the Indian country. The most competent

person to judge of Hester's qualifications for the rôle of wife and housekeeper wrote thus of her at this time :

She has exceeded my highest expectations in culinary affairs, & given me more than one specimen of real N[ew] E[ngland] bread. She is not ashamed to work, & is always at something — when nothing calls for the employment of her hands, she is reading writing or translating, & thus improving herself or endeavoring to benefit others.

To speak plain, she is deserving a better husband than I was ever made to become. She is all & more than I expected in her or any wife.

Then in June the young couple turned their faces eastward again, and the labors and hardships of the same arduous canoe trip were repeated despite the fact that Hester expected to become a mother in less than two months. On August 4 little Elizabeth Antoinette Boutwell opened her eyes in the mission home at La Pointe on Madeline Island in Lake Superior and just a month later she was baptized. On the fourteenth of September the family started on the long trip to Leech Lake, but a young woman accompanied them this time to assist Hester with her babe. One of the incidents of the trip was the baby's falling from her mother's back into the waters of the Mississippi. The fact that the mother was carrying the child on her back speaks for itself: only a woman of Indian blood would have adopted this expedient in order to have her hands free for carrying other things or for aiding her in traveling.

Life in the little mission at Leech Lake was not wholly without its dramatic quality during the next years. A scene that took place on June 24, 1836, before Hester's very eyes is described thus in her husband's diary :

This morning exhibited such a scene as I never before witnessed — a fight between two women, the Big Cloud's wife, and one of the Soldier's daughters. It commenced with billingsgate . . . each in turn reviling the other on her person. The Big Cloud's wife . . . at length . . . became so angry, that she got up and took a stick of wood upon which she was sitting, and laid it onto the other's head with all her might. Now commenced the battle. Each took her fellow by the hair, and pulled until both

fell. Then they began tearing each others clothes. . . . Next she [*the soldier's daughter*] attempted to stab her with a knife. . . . My wife now went out and begged them to desist fighting before her door, and thus ended the affray.

The winter of 1836-37 was hard, both for Indians and whites, since only half as much rice and half as much fish as usual were secured in the fall. In April Hester and her husband were pestered from morning to night with appeals for food, and many a touching scene must have been enacted in the little log cabin.

In May, 1837, a baby boy joined the mission family and when he was fourteen days old, he, like his sister before him, took a long journey of several weeks' duration. On August 13 at La Pointe he was baptized Ramsay Crooks Boutwell after his rich, influential grandfather in New York. The latter was not unmindful of this little family in the far-away West, for in September, 1836, with his second wife and Hester's seven half-brothers and sisters he arrived from New York at Mackinac, where one of his activities was to write to his son-in-law and to send a big bundle of newspapers and two boxes of good things. Sent by special conveyance, too, was "a 'Doll' for dear little Antoinette." The closing paragraph of his letter bespeaks his interest in his daughter and granddaughter: "Do I pray you write me often. All that concerns you interests me deeply. Kiss your dear Hester for me, and tell her to hug her Baby frequently for my sake. Give her an extra buss with the 'Doll.'"

No doubt to Hester's relief, Boutwell did not return to Leech Lake but went with his family to Fond du Lac, where, for a brief period, they lived with the family of another missionary, Edmund F. Ely, who also had married a woman with Indian connections, Catherine Bissell. She was born on November 25, 1817, and like Hester Crooks was educated at the Mackinac mission. On June 30, 1834, she went to La Pointe to assist in the mission school. Ely was there at the time and mentions her arrival in his diary. On July 12 she

was admitted to membership in the La Pointe church. On August 30 in the same church she became the wife of Ely. Until October they remained at La Pointe and then Ely returned to his mission school at Fond du Lac taking his bride with him. Evidently the house to which they repaired on their arrival was hardly even the "palace" that Boutwell describes, for Ely's diary entry for November 7 reads: "We begin to feel comfortable in my house. Have mudded & whitewashed (or wht clayed) it — & put up our beds (bunks)." And the next entry reveals the trials of the pioneer housewife: "A Rainy Night last night, but our house was tight compared with what it was when the last rain fell. . . . Only the Eaves had any bark on — & our floor was completely drenched. We laid some boards on the floor — put our blankets on them. Piled up our trunks & boxes — on wh[ic]h we laid a pole & over this drew my Bed oilcloth — crawled under & slept out the Storm."

Ely's diary also tells of one of the little customs that soon developed in this new home: "Some days since, Catharine copied a Scripture promise on a Slip of paper, applicable to the state of mind she supposed me to be in. It was very seasonable. I answered in the same manner. It has become a daily exercise."

Early in the new year Ely was obliged to go to La Pointe and during his absence Catherine and a native convert carried on the school. Later, after his return, he and his wife visited one of the native sugar camps, the grove where maple sugar was being made. They "Had a pleasant walk . . . by moonlight & — arrived at the Camp just before break of day." These spring sojourns of the Chippewa at their sugar camps were an interesting phase of savage life, and Ely and his wife could hardly have become conversant with Indian customs without witnessing some of them.

One day in the spring Ely fulfilled a long-felt desire by going to view the beautiful rapids in the St. Louis River above the mission. He took Catherine with him, as he did on most of his

trips afield. Once, in April, when he went alone, he returned to find his house closed and no wife to greet him. He learned to his dismay that she had started for the rapids early in the day. As he was starting out with others to search for her, he saw her coming across the Grand Portage road.

She had walked out for exercise in the morning . . . & having proceeded far on the way to Kokabika [*the rapids*], she concluded to go on, expecting to find me there — was much fatigued before arriving there. . . . She rested a few moments & pursued our path over the high lands — from lodge to lodge. Our tracks were fresh before her. She pressed on — Slipping & Stumbling. Having passed all the lodges, she must reach home, or suffer. Had nothing on her feet but one pr Hose & a pr of Seal Slippers. Her clothes were wet & heavy — excitement alone sustained her. With Bruised knees & wrenched Joints, she arrived — & in a short time was scarce able to support herself on her feet.

Perhaps this was the cause of her severe preparturition illness; for weeks she was very ill, and Ely was all attention to her, taking her out on the bay for canoe rides whenever she felt able to leave her bed. Finally, on May 29, he records in his diary, "This has been a day of deep interest & anxiety in the Family. About 11 o'clock Catharine was delivered of a *Daughter* both mother & daughter are doing well."

In this new object of attention and care Catherine's interests were completely absorbed. A little diary in her handwriting has been preserved, wherein she records very naïvely her amazement at all the sweetness and precocity of her little daughter. "We think her on the whole a pretty good baby. She does not seem to complain without some reason. She begins to notice those around her & appears pleased when noticed. She is now seven weeks old." On July 22 the mother recorded: "Sometimes it seems as if she was pleading to be taken up when she catches an eye fixed upon her, her whole body eyes, arm, are all in motion pleading." On one occasion the father made the entry: "Thursday [July] 28. Baby's fond of listening to music, sometimes she shows pleasure at the sound of the flute, rather fretful this afternoon." Another

entry characterizes her as lying in her cradle "hardly to be resisted." Quite modern parents these were — see how they frowned on that dreadful habit of rocking children to sleep: "Oct. 24. Her Father knocked of[f] the rockers from the cradle. She had got in a habit of being rocked to sleep & she could not sleep without We thought it best to have her go to sleep without rocking. The First day she cried very much. She wanted to be rocked. When she saw that it could not be so she finally drop[p]ed asleep. The next day she did not cry. She now goes to sleep without being rocked, which is altogether better."

The diary goes on through the excitement of the day when she held out her hands to be taken, to the memorable occasion when she could sit alone, and on to the red letter day in November when a tooth was discovered. She had one habit that children in civilized communities do not indulge: "Mary is very fond of sucking rabbit bones." Finally she began to creep, and the day came when she imitated the class of little Indians who were being taught the letter *k*. When she was eleven months old her mother was delighted to find her standing alone, and at thirteen months she began to walk. Thus did this half-breed mother pass her days far from civilization but interested in the things in which all mothers are interested.

Other half-breed women who are mentioned casually in the diaries and letters already quoted, nearly all of whom were wives of fur-traders, are Mrs. Vincent Roy, Mrs. Ambrose Davenport, Mrs. Pierre Cotté, Mrs. Henry Cotté, and Mrs. Lapointe. The diaries depict them journeying from place to place, as they did so frequently, attending mission classes, learning from the young Ely how to make bread, interpreting for the missionaries, making maple sugar, taking sleigh rides on the harbor ice, and in general living a half savage, half civilized life. One of them, Mrs. Chaboillez at Red Lake, stands out as a more distinct personality than most of the others because of a description of her in a letter of Frederick Ayer dated February 24, 1843: "His [*Chaboillez'*] wife with

much cordiality administered to our comfort during a week's tarry in their hospitable dwelling. . . . Mrs. C. is a half breed Ojibwa, and feels much interest in the spiritual welfare of the Indians. Her public station is favorable for her to exert much influence over the females." And again in July Ayer writes that she "was educated at Mackinaw school and is a member of the church."

In 1843 the record of certain white women in wilderness homes in the Minnesota interior begins. Again it is missionaries and their wives that have left the most detailed accounts of pioneer women. To Leech Lake and its neighboring lakes, Red, Cass, and Winnebagoshish, was sent a band of missionaries from Oberlin, Ohio. One of these, the wife of Dr. William Lewis, wrote many letters describing conditions as she found them. Several of these letters and a few of her coworker's, Mrs. Frederick Ayer, have been preserved.

In the spring of 1844 Mrs. Lewis took the long canoe journey from La Pointe to Leech Lake, where her husband had spent the winter. Her description of the journey is a succession of interesting pictures like the following:

We left La Pointe Tuesday May 7th in a bark canoe about 20 feet long. . . . Encamping is one of the beauties of *voyageing* as traveling is termed here. When a spot is selected with reference to smoothness and dryness the tent is presently set up and a blazing fire kindled before it. No scruples are had in cutting down the goodly cedars & firs & stripping off the boughs to form a bed or carpet over which an oil cloth is spread. This is our table also on which we spread a cloth & set our plates & cups, around which we sit in turkish fashion. I sometimes used my carpet bag for a seat. When our beds were unrolled & I had suspended my curtain I slept soundly as a queen in her palace.

When she reached the site of modern Duluth a novel and disagreeable experience was in store for her. A modern woman would hardly be shocked at the substitute for a gang-plank that was universally employed when passengers (practically always fur merchants or male sightseers) were carried. To early Victorian women, however, travel *à la* pickaback savored of frivolity, if not of immorality. Mrs. Lewis thus

describes her feelings: "When we came to a good place [to disembark] the waves were so high that it was unsaf[e] to run the canoe ashore but one or two men held it with their oars while two others jumped into the water & began to unload as fast as possible. One offered me his back to take me ashore. Though my feelings revolted there was no alternative & I was soon safely landed."

Portaging was new to Mrs. Lewis, and she describes in detail the customs of the *voyageurs*, who acted as beasts of burden and adhered to almost inflexible rules made by earlier *voyageurs* in conveying canoes and baggage over such carrying places. Of one of these places she writes: "My feet too for the first time were wet. I had jumped over many a mud hole & walked many a tamarack pole but not till I came near to the end of the last portage did I get over the tops of my india rubbers I found them excellent with moccasins over them to protect them from being torn by rocks & stones. A deceitful bog gave way & I sank down." It was with some difficulty that one of Mrs. Lewis' traveling companions helped her free herself. She also relates that her "bed was sometimes quite wet by water getting into the canoe."

Mrs. Lewis' most enlightening letter, written on December 17, 1844, contains two pencil sketches of her log house on Leech Lake, a plan of the interior, and a description of her *menage*. Probably these pencil sketches are the first contemporary pictures of a home on Minnesota soil. They show a one-story, log house with two chimneys and two "shed" additions with sloping roofs. An upturned canoe on the beach adds a vivid touch.

The plan shows a ground floor of two rooms, the kitchen and the combined bedroom and "sitting room." Apparently most of the beds were stationary but "Br. J[ohnson]'s on account of its great length & Br Spencer's because in the kitchen are made to turn up in the day time. The lines extending from the beds are curtains which constitute the only partition we have as yet between the bedrooms. It is designed to have one between the two doors . . . extending as near to

. . . the fireplace as consistent with safety & convenience." Corners for books are shown on the diagram and "Br J. has shelves suspended by cords. In our corner is a small medicine cupboard with three shelves extending from it over the window for books. The floor is carpeted walls lined with rush mats and with our trunks, two chairs & some stools, presents quite a comfortable aspect when we are all seated round a fire of pine notts, by the light of which Sister J[ohnson] & myself sew, while someone usually reads aloud. Br Spencer usually performs this office. Is reading Bancroft's history of the United States which is very interesting."

In the kitchen were "the stove, the most important article . . . the cupboard for dishes & cooked food, of which we do not however keep much on hand . . . a couple of shelves for water pails kettles &c," a wood box in one corner, "a ladder which swings up & is fastened to the chamber floor by a hook," and "a trap door to the cellar. Our table stands when not in use, during the day, before the window at the end of the cupboard, and at night when it would interfere with the bed before it."

Later in the letter she describes how the women of the mission shared in the household duties:

I thought you might like to hear a little of our domestic arrangements & how our time is occupied. Well to be brief as possible Sister J. & myself divide the work into forenoon & afternoon & alternate a week at each. We are obliged to be in the kitchen one of us nearly if not quite all of the day time. We get some time to sew in it, sometimes besides teaching the children & reading to them & others who come in. We rise early & usually have our breakfast out of the way before any company comes in. This consists almost always of boiled fish, & rice boiled the day before warmed in the stove oven. Our stove is a great convenience. We have fish boiled baked or S[team]ed & wheat or corn bread or boiled pudding for dinner, with occasionally the variety of a mess of beans or rabbits. We think we cannot afford to eat wheat & corn on the same day as neither are plenty here Our suppers are rice with milk & sugar, with fruit two or three times a week. We have some milk for breakfast. We use butter very seldom. . . . As we have good appetites we can eat bread without butter & fish without bread.

She goes on to mention that she liked "to be tidy occasionally & the winds here make rude work with hair I am wearing my black cap this winter. We find attention to appearance as important here as anywhere."

One of Mrs. Lewis' charges also believed in paying attention to her personal appearance, though not in a way sanctioned by the pious woman: "I have been tried with my [half-breed] girl Lucy somewhat. She had improved . . . much during my absence, particularly in reading & speaking english but I found that vanity had taken possession of her mind. She is rather pretty looking & desire to increase her beauty had led her to use various substances as paint, not the vermilion with which the Indian girls thickly smear their faces but a delicate tinge that would do credit to the art of a city belle."

In this rude house several children were born to the mission families. Association with the Indian and half-breed children caused moments of anxiety for the parents, but the little folk seem to have had a happy childhood despite their frequent quarrels. They learned to speak both English and Ojibway and probably a smattering of the *patois* used by the French-Canadian *voyageurs*. Most of them had left the wilderness before the missions were abandoned in 1859. In a recent letter from one of them, Dr. and Mrs. Lewis' eldest daughter, mention is made of the little log house.

These descriptions of a few of the women that Minnesota and Wisconsin claim as pioneers may serve to show that the homes of the wilderness in the thirties and forties were not devoid of charm and interest. The experiences of a few women like those mentioned illustrate very well the customary life in the rude structures that stood on the shores of many a river and lake. The names of most are unknown, but they ate the same food, saw the same pageant of savage life, and traveled the same waterways in the same manner as Hester Boutwell, Catherine Ely, and Lucy Lewis.

GRACE LEE NUTE



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