

Sturr Letter Tells of Life in Old Ottawa

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In the westward movement that gathered its greatest momentum right after the Civil War, a young man from New Jersey came to live in Ottawa. William H. Sturr apparently stayed but a short time, as no record of him exists at the Ottawa Library.

But the record he left of early Ottawa in a letter to his aunt and uncle describes how people lived here in 1866. The letter was found by a descendent, Mrs. Thomas R. Kinney, of New York City, and given to the Franklin County Historical Society in 1968.

Writing to Jacob and Hester Hancock of Patterson, New Jersey, on June 24, 1866, from Ottawa, Sturr tells them a letter they had sent "found me well and doing well as far as the times will allow. Times are hard out here and money is scarce, hands are plenty and work is hard to get especially on a farm but mechanics and masons get good wages and have plenty of work. They get from \$2 to \$5 per day. There's any amount of houses going up in this place and all over the state immigrants are swarming by the thousands seeking for new homes. Kansas is bound to be a great state, and she will vie with any other state in the union in a few years. She has advantages that other states have not. She abounds with everything that a state can ask for. Yes I know I am far from home and friends but if a fellow can't do well among his friends he better go where he can. I often think of them and wish I could be with them. But then again I think I will make all the money and get a start and then settle down. I take my comfort with them in my Old age if such is my luck. You can't think how lonely I feel away out here, no body but strangers to associate with. They don't make a person feel at home with them. There is none like our folks. I often think of you and grandfather and all the dear ones in N.J. I often wish I could be there with you, not that I do not like Kansas, oh no, I like this place very well indeed. There is no better place to live as far as health is concerned. I could have some of my friends here and the first that you know I would be contented to live and die here. Well, if I had such a friend as you have I might not feel so lonely after all but I'm sorry to say I have not and there is no prospects of one yet on my part. I and two or three fellows are keeping batch. We get along very well. I live very plane (sic) and our bill of fare from day to day and month to month is cornbread and bacon. All that constitutes our diet is cornbread, bacon, molasses and coffee. What do you think of that and how would you like to live that way from one year to another. Well that's the way the peapel (sic) live here, no potatoes and hardly any vegetables, no pies and cakes, that would kill you, wouldn't it. Uncle Jake, and most of all do without milk and butter in the bargain. Well I don't think I will stand it much longer. I will buy me a cow. I have got one but she is dry. I couldn't do any better. I had to take her as some work for the man was hard up. I was sorry to learn that you had been sick and not able to work for such a long time. If you had been out here you might have been free of a cold, such diseases are hardly known here, in fact there is not any boddy (sic) sick here that I know of.

The wether (sic) has been quite cool here this spring, but we get along very well with our crops. Wheat is ready to harvest, some have harvested. It looks well, it will turn out 30 bushels to the acre and perhaps more. Corn is as high as a man's head. Some fields will yield 100 bushels to the acre. Oats and potatoes look very good but there will not be much (sic) fruit (sic), some peaches and a few apples, while there is not much (sic) planted yet. Cherries are ripe, strawberries are all gone, they commenced to ripen in May. So you see we are a bit ahead of New Jersey. Potatoes and peas are in market. One man brought in potatoes that weighed a half pound a piece. This is a splendid place to raise fruit of all kinds if the farmers would turn their hands to it but they don't care, all they care about is to raise corn and such, only a few excepted.

No I never got the letter that you wrote, and I suppose that you never got the one I wrote to you. I directed it to Paterson post office. I hear from home quite often. Father is about selling out and coming out west as far as Missouri. Brother John is still in Illinois and doing well. Joseph is still to home and well, if he and father is not on a visit to Ohio. They intended to start a short time ago.

Well, I will close for the present, my love to you all. Write soon and write all the particulars and I will do the same.

From your nephew.

Wm. H. Sturr
Ottawa, Kansas

Editor's Note: In 1872 there were about 4,000 people in Ottawa. In 1866, there were fewer than 1,000. If you want to see the Ottawa that William Sturr inhabited, there is a picture of Ottawa in 1867 in the Old Depot Museum. It is a town with a wide dirt main street and a few mainly wooden buildings. The railroad had not made it to Ottawa yet. That happened in 1868.