

Home Life in the Early Days of Kansas

By Martha Root Valentine

From *The Club Member*, Vol. 6, No. 5, February 1908, pp. 5-9

Located at Kansas Historical Society, Topeka

It will be fifty years the fifth day of next July since my husband, myself and baby landed from a steamboat in Leavenworth. We had started from an interior county in Iowa and were bound on an inspection trip of the territory of Kansas. We brought with us a big white horse and an open buggy and this was our conveyance in our journeying, over new roads over virgin prairies, stopping in towns and villages when convenient and with hospitable farmers when necessary. It was indeed the trip of a long lifetime, full to overflowing with the sweetest pleasures of new experiences. After a few weeks of sightseeing, driving over a considerable part of the then known Kansas, spending one night in Topeka, we returned to Iowa. We knew we intended to go to Kansas to make a new home and so preempted a farm, or rather some raw prairie land, about twenty miles south of Topeka. We never lived on it, and I am now unable to locate the land exactly.

It took but a few months to straighten out our very limited affairs in Iowa, and then we found ourselves on the back-track, and by the summer of 1859 real residents of the new state, locating first in Leavenworth. Ten months were enough of city life, so in the early spring of 1860 we moved to Peoria City, the then county seat of Franklin County. This village was located on the banks of the Marais des Cygnes River about eight miles east (?) of the present city of Ottawa, though at that time all the country surrounding where Ottawa now stands was an Indian reservation, and Ottawa was not even in contemplation. On our way down from Leavenworth to Peoria City we forded the Kansas River at Lawrence, a thing few people ever did; in fact I have never been told by any other woman that she had had a similar experience. The river was very low, but the quicksand was very deep, and it took considerable effort and ingenuity to keep the horses going, for the quicksand, a stiff current and a strong wind threatened to upset us at any moment.

In Peoria my real pioneer life in Kansas commenced, though as a girl and young person I had experienced pioneer life in Ohio and Iowa, and here in Peoria also commenced the long stretch of years so full of both hardships and happiness, and here really commenced the long and happy life in Kansas to which I now look back.

I deem it impossible for me to bring to the understanding and appreciation of the present day generation the privations and hardships which the women and men of those pioneer days had to undergo. I do not mean the perils and dangers of the heroic and bloodcurdling type. These are easy to understand, but the hardships and privations of the every day life, the quiet grindings of the common poverty, the struggle against unchangeable conditions, the mother-worry over a family of small but active and hungry children, the monotony of it all, the loneliness, and the haunting dread of what might happen next.

It is of these small things I would tell the readers of the Club Member. The larger affairs, the battles, the building of cities, the politics, the operations of the state, are matters of history, and the men who did their part so well and nobly have themselves, from their various viewpoints, told nearly all of it. I only wish it were within my powers of description to give to the women of this generation a

true-to-life picture of one home day with its surroundings, its joys, its worries, its triumphs, its rewards. I wish it were possible to convey a mental photograph of a home so utterly devoid of the simplest luxuries and so restricted in what today are considered necessities.

And yet, with it all, we were happy. We were all young, strong and optimistic. Each of us was as good as her neighbor, for we were all poor in worldly goods. We had our little social gatherings, joked and jollied with each other, went to church in our best, and made the most of what came our way. There was a sympathy and kindness between us, and always a willingness to help each other in times of sickness or distress or want. I really believe the memory of the hard life which was our portion then, affects me more in these than the real thing did in those days.

When we arrived in Peoria we moved into the County building, which was a hardwood frame structure of two rooms measuring overall about eighteen by thirty feet. We occupied as our home the east room, which was at least fifteen by eighteen feet, the other room of the house being occupied by the county safe, some chairs, a table and the officials of the county as an office. Even now I have not the courage to tell of our meager furnishings, even though they were more pretentious and elaborate than most of our neighbors for some distance around. For be it remembered that we had not yet been married many years and had only recently come to Kansas from the old home, and still had some of the wedding finery and the old-home belongings. We had a few good old-fashioned Ironstone china dishes, among them two big soup tureens. We also had a bureau and bookcase combined, and several heavy office chairs. All these things we brought from Iowa, and I still have at my home in Topeka the old combination bureau and bookcase and two or three dishes.

We lived in the County building several months and then moved to a smaller one-room house out in the country. But in spite of all we somehow managed to live comfortably, and to occasionally entertain the neighbors, the preacher, or a few politicians overnight. And I am still entertaining the politicians occasionally. For almost as soon as we located in Kansas my husband became a public man and we had to do the honors to others as they were extended to him over the country.

The year 1860 was the year of the terrible drouth[sic], a drouth as probably had never visited the state before, and such as has never visited it since. Seven long months without a drop of rain. The spring opened rather promisingly, though dry, but no rain came, and soon the growing crops, the wild berries, the prairie grass, the natural and planted forage, and every living vegetable thing, withered where it grew, died and scattered to the northward before the heavy, hot, scorching blasts that blew continually from the south. If by chance there was anything which through favoring circumstances retained life, the grasshoppers, swarming in clouds, settled upon it and completed the work of devastation. Then was the ingenuity of the housewife taxed in equal proportion to that of the provider. All through that hot summer, and up to late in the fall, when aid commenced to come in from the eastern states, there was actually not a potato, tomato, head of lettuce, cabbage, onion, radish, bean or any kind of garden vegetable to be had in that village (Peoria) or the surrounding country. Neither was there any meat of any kind excepting a little wild game, nor any butter, eggs or even milk. The cows dried up. So did the wells, and we carried water for household purposes other than washing clothes nearly a mile up the highest bluff in Kansas. We took our washing down to the river bed; dirty, filthy water as I remember it now. We did not waste any water at our homes you may rest assured. The children were certainly not weakened by too frequent baths.

In the neighboring fields a few turnips managed to grow, and these furnished both vegetable and fruit diet. Because of a lack of market, quite a bit of corn had been left over from the year before, so we had mush without milk, and cornbread and such other corn dishes as desperation could suggest. I have made corn bread day after day until the odor of its cooking would almost nauseate me, so tired had I become of it. But I had to make it and to eat it too, for at times there was nothing else. One time I got some potatoes from the "Aid Store." As I was peeling them for boiling purposes, an old lady who happened to be calling on me seriously chided me because I did so, for even potato peelings were too precious to be thrown away. Can any woman who has ever done her own cooking think of a worse situation in the face of insistent demands of vigorous young appetites? That winter Mr. Valentine killed many prairie chickens which came to feed on the sumach[sic] bushes surrounding our house like a young orchard, for there was nothing else for them to eat. But they were very thin and poor, there was no lard to cook them in, nor butter to season them with, and dry prairie chicken is about the most uninviting substitute for something toothsome and nourishing of anything I know about. Think of prairie chicken every day so cooked and served. Mr. Valentine also managed to gather a large crop of hickory nuts, which helped out some; they were not served for dessert either but were part of the real meal. Certain it is that the woman of the house had as tearful a time indoors as her husband had fearful outdoors. Nothing to cook but corn, nothing to season it with, little to cook it in, few conveniences to serve it with. The aid donated by the east kept many from actually starving; kept many in the few clothes they wore.

There were no stores to speak of for there was nothing to sell, and while we had a little money there was nothing to spend it for. A neighbor who grew fainthearted, concluded to go back east and sold us a peck of dried peaches, and these peaches were the only luxuries in the neighborhood, so were used largely for the sick. For awhile there was not a pound of flour in all the miles around that I knew anything about. I am afraid this sounds like a complaining note, which is not intended, for it is a fact we were cheerful and happy far beyond the picture. We helped each other to the best of our ability in a material way, made a sport out of our necessities, tried not to lose heart, and acted like any other community of young men and women, sanguine and optimistic, would act. Comparatively few journeyed back east; nearly all stuck it out to a glorious victory. We made coffee out of parched corn principally, though occasionally we would use barley or parched oats; tea was a whispered luxury. Even sugar was beyond reach and a little sorghum molasses took the place of all sweetenings.

A year or two later, when our old home and marriage fineries were about exhausted, came the necessity of buying clothes, bed coverings and such. Calico was the almost universal dress goods for women and small children, and it cost forty cents a yard, when centers were as hard to get as dollars were later. Beds, the best of them, were made up with one sheet, muslin. And such muslin! It would not be considered good enough for horse blankets now days. The heavy ginghams came later, and they were dress-up materials. Not the pretty, tasty and dainty ginghams of the present market, but heavy, coarse and really ugly ones. But the ginghams never wore out and they served their purpose well down to the second and third member of the family, who finished them as shirts. Then there were the balbriggan petticoats, costing dollars upon dollars of some man's hard labor; heavy and dark at the top, highly colored in vivid stripes running round and round above the hem. After the "Aid" flour came in we made underclothing out of the flour sacks; and not only for the children, either. Matches were so scarce and expensive that we used them only in cases of absolute necessity. It is a joke among my children to this very day regarding my economy in the use of matches, but fifty years has not been sufficient to break me of that habit.

And the snakes. The bluffs and woods ad prairies around Peoria were fairly alive with them. Garter snakes, bull snakes, black snakes, cotton snakes, corn snakes, water snakes, rattle snakes, moccasins, copperheads, blue racers, and

then some. They were not only our neighbors, but they also visited with us in our homes. One morning when Mr. Valentine put his foot down into his boot, a hissing snake disputed possession. Getting dinner one noon I happened to glance over to the table and saw a long snake slowly crawling across the table making for the sugar bowl. Mr. Valentine was at home and he killed the snake, as sugar was too expensive to feed to snakes. Another time I picked up a dress off the floor and noticing it seemed rather heavy, shook it and a big snake dropped out. But I must stop, for if I should start in to tell snake stories the limit of my article would soon be reached. Our experiences with snakes amuse me now, and I laugh as I tell them to my grandchildren, but they were not funny then.

In those days eastern Franklin County, the whole of the county for that matter, was thickly settled with Indians. While they were the most insistent and persistent beggars, they were kind and helpful in a way. Within a radius of three or four miles of Peoria were six or seven Indian villages, and the Indian men were not so bad and vicious as they became only a few years later. That was our safety then, perhaps our salvation.

The county seat remained in Peoria only a short time when it was taken to Ohio City, by virtue of a more or less legal election. Ohio City was located about ten miles south of where the present city of Ottawa stands. While there is still a small village left at Peoria, there is absolutely nothing remaining of Ohio City at the present time. We followed the county seat to Ohio City. In the mean time the war broke out in extra vigor over the eastern border and my husband engaged in raising and drilling troops, his headquarters being mostly at the then seat of war, Paola. And I was left alone much of the time with my children. The men, excepting those too old and feeble to stand the life, went to the front. We had but one stove, an old fashioned "Charter Oak" cooking stove, but it became more or less of a problem to keep this one in fuel. But that problem, too, as did the rest, worked itself to some sort of solution, and we actually suffered but little, if any. At first we moved into a house almost in the center of business. There were probably ten others varying little in size, shape or pretensions. Soon we had to move, and this time to a lonely place some distance out on the main road to the Sac and Fox, the Ottawa and Muncie Indian reservations. Mr. P.P. Elder, then as now prominent in affairs, was agent for some, maybe all, of these tribes, and possibly others as well. These Indians drew Government rations at Ohio City every alternate Saturday. Hundreds and hundreds of them participated. As I remember, every adult Indian had to appear in person, to draw his meat and sugar and other luxuries denied to us poor whites. Thanks to the agent, however, steaks and roasts, the best there were, occasionally found way to our kitchens. The butchering were done on the prairie back of our house in all its horrible brutality, for the Indians were allowed to do their own killing, and they made it as savage and spectacular as their wild imaginings could devise. And those awful nights following these ration days! Of all my pioneer life, those nights, away out in that lonely place, were the most terrible. The nearest neighbor was not within hearing distance of my voice had I wished to call for help. The army work and the necessity of making a living by a law practice which had to be spread over all the sparcely[sic] settled adjoining counties, kept Mr. Valentine away from home practically all the time. By this time the white man had learned the profits of selling liquor, and the Indian had learned to love it better than life itself, far better than the lives of his squaws and papooses.

If straight liquor could not be had, old "Long Cabin Bitters" took its place. Under the influence of either, the Indian, who, when sober, was not particularly amiable, became wild, fighting, horrible fiends. After I got my children to sleep, as early in the evening as possible, I would put out all the lights in the house so that the attention of the Indians might not be attracted, and sit there in the dark, cowering, trembling, fearful, until way late in the night, or the early morning when the last horrible shout would go by. But there was no help for it, and I lived through it, but I could not do it again.

Also we owned the first coal oil lamp ever seen in that little city. It was a cheap glass affair, small and frail, scarcely fit to be used in the humblest kitchens now days. Coal oil cost \$1.25 per gallon then, and a poor quality at that.

Lighting by kerosene was a expensive luxury, and we used tallow candles almost exclusively. My husband at that time owned, and he carried it all through his life and it is in the family yet, one of the few gold watches in all that country. He always left it with me when away, for robberies on the road and the outskirts of that scant civilization were frequent, and I can remember yet how the care of that watch and the responsibility of its safe keeping worried me.

In 1863 Ottawa was established almost in the center of an Indian reservation, and sometime later during that year the county seat was moved to the new town. Of course we followed, moving in December, 1863. The house in which we lived was mounted on wheels and moved bodily, without disturbing either furniture or family. When we were on the long north slope about two miles out of Ohio City something broke, and for three long weeks we lived three feet up in the air, during bitter cold weather and nothing but the old "Charter Oak" cooking stove to keep us warm. Then we started again, but when we reached the Rock Creek crossing, one of the worst pieces of road imaginable, stuck fast. But we were still four miles from Ottawa, so one beautiful, warm afternoon the men put the children and me in a wagon and started for Ottawa. But we had scarcely left the house when, without warning, one of those awful cold winds came upon us from the coldest corner of the cold northwest, almost paralyzing horses and passengers. In spite of my efforts, one of my children had both hands and feet frosted.

We were taken to the house of Mr. and Mrs. John Walruff, where we staid[sic] until our own house came in and was made habitable. The house was small, only three tiny rooms all told, but they were comfortable. Water was scarce at first, and needs must be carried two blocks. A cistern was dug and soon and shortly a good well, so that the water problems was solved for all time. Some ambitious early settlers, early in 1858, had established the capital of Kansas at Minneola twelve or fourteen miles northwest of Ottawa, and had built a "State House" and a "Governor's Mansion." Nearly all Kansas has believed the present governor's house out on Eighth and Buchanan (in Topeka) is the first, but as a matter of fact, one was built at Minneola, though never occupied by a governor, nearly fifty years ago. The "State House" was moved to Ottawa about the time we arrived, and the school was established by Baptist missionary women from New York in the hall designed for legislative purposes. Here my children started to school, more than half of the pupils being Indian girls and boys. A better grade, more neighborly, kindlier people never settled a new town or county, and we soon became almost as a band of true-blood sisters. Some of the shifts and devices in the way of entertainment were ludicrous; they would show up here almost as caricatures. I will not attempt their telling.

After my husband's election to the District Bench, times in our family grew easier, and after our removal to Ottawa the hardships less burdensome. But even in Ottawa at first we sometimes had difficulty in getting the necessities of life, and this was by reason of the fact that the town grew much faster than did the transportation facilities, everything having to be brought in by wagon.

In 1868 Mr. Valentine was elected a member of the Supreme Court of Kansas, taking his seat on the bench in January, 1869. We continued to live in Ottawa until after his election to a second term, but on April 1, 1875, moved to Topeka. We had already bought a residence in Topeka and we immediately moved into it, and ever since, almost thirty-three years, this same house has been our home.

I have sketched in a most unsatisfactory way a few of the minor happenings of the first seven or eight years of our residence in Kansas. I have fallen far short of the modest first intent of this article. And yet maybe I have conveyed the idea intended; that in extremity, when necessary, the pioneer woman could be as shifty and resourceful as are the men in the same circumstances. They bore their burdens, too, and those burdens were as heavy, as grinding, as pitiless as those of the men; and they bore them as cheerfully as the men. Fifty years of life in Kansas! It is a long time. Of my nine children, eight are Jayhawkers, and all loyal Kansans. Kansas has been good to me and mine; and I expect to be with her the rest of my days, and sleep the long sleep 'neath her blue skies and green sod.