

## “Thanksgiving Day Fare Slim in 1860”

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The history of Kansas includes many rough years and financial setbacks. Certainly one of the most severe disasters was occurring 125 years ago now, just as the territory was struggling to acquire statehood.

Known as “The Great Drought of 1860,” its magnitude is hard to comprehend today, for it was just not another extended dry spell. According to accounts of the day, the drought began in June 1858 and it didn’t rain again for a year and a half.

One of the pioneer families of Franklin County which witnessed the desolation and starvation of those many months was that of Judge Daniel M. Valentine. Valentine brought his wife and two small children from Iowa in 1859 and settled near Peoria City. He set up a law practice in Peoria, which was briefly enjoying the attention of being the county seat of Franklin County.

Valentine soon was made the first district judge in the county, a distinction which resulted in his portrait being hung in the old courtroom of the Franklin County Courthouse.

During the 1860 drought, the Valentines watched as wide cracks broke open parched fields, wells and springs dried up, and scorching winds swept the prairies. The Marais des Cygnes was so low a hole had to be dug by the side of the river to allow water to seep into it.

At this crude reservoir the family washed clothes, watered the livestock, and drew water for drinking and cooking.

Mrs. Valentine later recalled, “Of course, it goes without saying that we might have preferred otherwise, but it was the only place to get water, and we had to have it.”

When in her 80s, Mrs. Valentine especially remembered what she served her young family on Thanksgiving Day of 1860...125 years ago. There were only three items on the menu—hoe cake, dried peaches, and gaunt prairie chicken. However, the family was grateful for that much.

The hoe cake was made of just corn meal, salt and water. Valentine received the dried peaches as payment for his services in some legal matter.

The prairie chickens, although bony due to their inability to find food, were surprisingly plentiful.

“Our house was surrounded by sumac bushes which were usually full of prairie chickens,” Mrs. Valentine recalled. “We could get all the chickens we wanted by shooting them from the windows of the house.”

The birds were boiled and salted in an effort to tenderize them.

Butter, sugar and coffee were all luxuries not to be found. Lard was substituted for butter if one was lucky enough to have any bread to smear it on. Honey or a little sorghum were the only sweeteners available.

As for coffee, a grim replacement was concocted by boiling dry bread crumbs with a little parched corn. Even this brownish, brackish liquid was too extravagant for most as corn was synonymous with gold dust that year.

There were no large stockpiles of food in the territory with which to feed the starving, so relief efforts had to bring aid in from around the country. This reinforced the perception of Kansas being perpetually a drought-riddled land of famine, and slowed immigration to the struggling would-be state.

There also was an exodus of pioneers already here. The drought forced an estimated 30,000 settlers, nearly one-third of the territory's population, to throw up their hands and return to the East. "In Gold We Trust, In Kansas We Busted" was the message they scrawled on the canvasses of their covered wagons.

But there were those who remained. The Valentines moved to Ohio City, and later to Ottawa, as the county seat was moved about those infant towns. In 1868, Judge Valentine obtained a seat on the Kansas State Supreme Court, where he served for the next quarter of a century.

The Valentines like many others, struggled and starved, but survived. Winning out over nature and the rawness of the times, they had the satisfaction to witness the return of the rains and share in the rich harvests that followed.