Miss Meeker’s Story of Early Ottawa  
Found in FCHS files. Source or date of creation not identified.

Miss Grace Meeker (1865-1947) talked to the third grades at Hawthorne [Elementary School] about her experiences during early days in Ottawa.

She came here on the L.L. and G. Railroad. The station was then on the south side of the river across the street south of the Nelson Hotel. There were trees on the river banks but away from there prairie grass grew everywhere. It had pretty flowers when it was in bloom.

As soon as the settlers came they planted trees. Most of them were quick growing trees like the soft maple and Ailanthus, which is commonly known as the Tree of Heaven. A worm soon came that ate the leaves on the maple trees. It as the maple worm and even more disagreeable than the elm worms we have had lately. The Tree of Heaven was supposed to help get malaria, or chills and fever out of the country.

There were many fruit trees in the country then, and food was plentiful.

Around all the houses in Ottawa were picket fences. The children walked along the board sidewalks outside the fences and played tunes on the fences by running a stick along the pickets.

People sodded all the lawns with blue grass which they brought from along the river banks. It grew in the shade. It would grow in the yards that were shady.

Miss Meeker’s home was at the corner of Sixth and Mulberry Streets where Professor Ritchie now lives. She first went to school to Miss Morse who had come here as a missionary among the Indians. K When Miss Morse grew older and could no longer teach the Indians because of her deafness she had a private school in Ottawa. Among other things, she taught the girls to sew. As the girls sewed, she read to them. Most of the stories were about pious missionaries.

Later, when Miss Meeker was in the seventh grade, she went to the Central School. In those days the boys and girls in school had to stand to spell and to read. They always had to line up at the side of the room in a straight line with their toes on a chalk mark in the floor. That was called “toeing the mark.”

There were no drinking fountains in the school. The janitor put several big buckets of water on a bench outside the building. He filled the buckets from a well. The children all drank from dippers that were in the buckets. No one ever thought of germs in those days.

A cyclone once struck Ottawa. Miss Meeker could see it from out her kitchen door while she was helping her mother prepare the evening meal.

Miss Meeker had a pony named Nellie. She had another gray horse that could untie his rope with his teeth.

It was very dark on the streets of early Ottawa at night when there was no moon. There were no street lights and no flashlights. When people went places they carried lanterns. Some burned kerosene (coal oil) while others had a candle inside.

Sometime in the 80’s Ottawa had a street car. The line ran up Main Street. It branched on Main and Seventh Streets. One branch ran on the east side and one on the west side of town. It was pulled by two strong mules.

One very cold winter the ice froze eighteen inches thick on the river. Boys and girls skated from Thanksgiving until after March 1st. Much ice on the river was sawed in cakes and put away for summer. The ice was packed in saw dust in big ice houses on the bank. There were no electric ice boxes and no ice plants to make ice at that time.

There was once an oil mill in Ottawa. Oil was pressed from castor beans and sold.

Wagons were made in early Ottawa and Miss Meeker’s father painted the new wagons. She has seen many wagons made. It was interesting to see the iron tires put on the wheels.

Mr. Bement once took Miss Meeker through his grist mill. He made flour by grinding wheat between two great stones. The mill was on the river bank by the dam.

There was once a bicycle race in Ottawa. The racers rode those high, old-fashioned bicycles. It must have been funny to watch.

There were no dugouts or sod houses in this part of the country. They were built farther west.

Miss Meeker taught in Ottawa University. She organized the science department there. K She was the librarian at the City Library for many years also.

Another time Miss Meeker told us about early Ottawa. She came to Ottawa in 18870 when she was five years old. Ottawa was organized in 1866 and was four years old when Miss Meeker arrived. Her father was a wagon painter and trimmer.

At that time prairie grass grew all around Ottawa. Some man lost a log chain in the grass. He could not find it and so he lit a fire to burn the grass off the ground. The fire spread and got away from the man. It came toward Ottawa University but a teacher at O.U. showed the people how to back fire. Miss Meeker was a little girl and helped to beat out the back fire.

The sidewalks were made of boards. The sidewalks across Skunk Run were little bridges. When the Marais des Cygnes overflowed its banks at flood time, the sidewalks would float. The boys used them for rafts and had a very good time playing sailor.

One the time railroad bridge fell in with an engine on it. Many strong men pulled the engine out with ropes. They pulled to the rhythm of a song.

A cyclone once struck Ottawa. Miss Meeker could see it from out her kitchen door as she was helping her mother prepare the evening meal. One woman went from the kitchen to the dining room to put her supper on the table. When she started back to the kitchen, the kitchen had blown away. Another house nearby had turned upside down and the carpet was on the ceiling.

None of Ottawa’s streets were paved then. One woman told Miss Meeker that she lost her rubber books crossing Main Street one dark night. They stuck in the mud and she did not know they had come off. She never did find them.

Miss Meeker told us how to make yeast. Pioneers took hop fruit off the hop vines. They let it ferment in some water and mixed it with corn meal.

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“First? she? went to school to Miss Laura Griffen?, who was a sister of Miss Mary Ward, the first public school teacher. Next she went to Miss Morse.