

Hardships of Pioneers in Northwestern Iowa

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HARDSHIPS OF PIONEERS IN NORTHWESTERN IOWA.

BY W. H. INGHAM.

The first settlements on the upper waters of the Des Moines river were made in Humboldt and Kossuth counties in 1854. These grew and spread out considerably in 1855. In 1856 there was a general tendency to strike out again and many new settlements were made all along the border of Iowa and Minnesota. It was during the summer of this year that the first cabins were built and settlements made at Okoboji and Spirit lakes, that were destroyed by a party of Sioux Indians the following March, the history of which is so well remembered as the Spirit Lake massacre. It was in this year that the first little pioneer cabins made their appearance in Palo Alto county, on the west branch of the Des Moines river; and also at the head waters of the east branch, where the first cabin was built early in July by Calvin Tuttle at the grove and lake now bearing his name. He was soon followed by a family of Johnsons, and later by two other families which made up the settlement for the year. I have been rather more explicit as to this settlement than with the others mentioned, as I purpose showing in the following sketch some of the mishaps and experiences of several of its members during the cold and stormy winter of 1857, as seen and known in great part by myself.

When Mr. Tuttle had completed his buildings in the fore part of November he and his son George went below on the Des Moines river and procured two loads of supplies for the winter. On their way back they reached the farms of Horace Schenck and Robert R. Moore, a few miles above Algona, from which they expected to drive home in two days. In order to get started early the next morning they teamed their loads out across the Black Cat creek, some three miles on their way, and left them in an arm of the creek bottom, lit-

tle thinking at the time that their wagons would not be moved again until late in April. When morning came, it being December 1st, they found one of the most violent snow storms ever known in the history of this section of the country sweeping down from the northwest. It held on for some three days with a heavy fall of snow, filling up the ravines and creek bottoms, so that for the time all travel was stopped.

From now on storm followed storm with short intervals until their wagons were buried in fifteen feet of snow and were not found again until January 18th, after a long search by running poles down into the snow. Soon after they were found Mr. Tuttle came to our cabin, where I was stopping at the time with Charles E. Putnam, A. L. Seeley and Thos. C. Covell, and wanted to borrow or buy a pair of snow shoes, thinking he might be able to reach home in this way. We did not see how we could let him have a pair as we had no other means of getting about, although we did have four horses and a pair of mules snowed under in a stable near by, and then, further, we considered it very unsafe for him to undertake the trip alone.

After listening to his story, in which he told us he had heard nothing from his family since he left them in November, and that he was feeling very uneasy about their safety and must in some way try and get home, I asked him if he thought he could walk through from John James' cabin in one day, it being thirty-five miles, and if so, told him I would meet him there early the next morning with an extra pair of snow shoes and see him home. This he was confident he could do, so at the appointed time I found him ready for the start and then we were soon off. The morning was cold with quite a breeze from the northwest, which gradually gained in force till noon, making it quite impossible for Mr. Tuttle, who was an elderly man and inexperienced on snow shoes, to take a thirty-five mile gait. We now planned to abandon the through trip in one day and camp over night

at the river timber. This we reached near Armstrong Grove in time to get a fire started before dark and prepare our camp as well as we could for the night.

Without blankets or any extra clothing, with the mercury from 20 to 30 degrees below zero, we needed no place for sleep. Our time was pretty well occupied in cutting and gathering wood and keeping up a good fire. The night finally wore away and the morning opened up much colder, with the air so filled with snow that we could easily see we were to stay in camp and make the most of it until another day. Our only supply of eatables on hand was a small piece of fresh pork, some unground burnt coffee, tea and sugar, that Mr. Tuttle had planned to take home. These without salt or any kind of cooking utensil, not even a cup, proved to be a real aggravation, especially so, when we were using ice to quench our thirst. The day passed by and then another tedious night. Fortunately the storm slackened down during the night making it possible for us to travel again. I now told Mr. Tuttle we would go out on the prairie at the break of day when he must choose to either go on home or return with me regardless of the weather.

When the time came it only took one thought of home and family on his part to determine our course, which quickly brought us facing the wind from the northwest once more. After a tedious day's tramp we found ourselves at night still some four miles away from the home. Mr. Tuttle, who was now very tired, almost despaired of ever seeing his family again. It was not long afterward, however, before we caught sight of the light in the home window which proved to be a great stimulant for Mr. Tuttle as well as myself, and brought out our very best efforts. With several stops to rest we finally reached the cabin and then, when free of our snow shoes Mr. Tuttle stepped up and opened the door, I felt relieved from all further obligation on my part, as I had fully met my engagement with him to see him home. I followed him closely as he went in, and for a moment Mrs. Tuttle and the children seated

about a table seemed almost dazed by the abrupt and unceremonious way we had entered their home. The change that instantly took place, when they fully realized who it was and learned from him that George was still alive and well, must be left to the imagination alone for its full and complete picture. With the best in the house for supper and a good night's sleep we came out in the morning in fine shape. I stopped over one day to rest, and returned to our cabin well pleased with the outcome and the lessons learned about winter traveling on the prairies.

As the provisions in the settlement became very scarce, owing to the failure of Mr. Tuttle in getting through with his two loads, the Johnson family decided to leave and go back to their home in Iowa. Mr. Johnson fitted up a sleigh for winter traveling and then with his family and household goods started out the latter part of February for the Algona settlement, forty miles away, expecting to get through in two or three days. This he could have done had the crust on the snow been as firm all the way as it was at the lake when he started. In many places where the snow was deep his team and load would break through and then he was obliged not only to shovel them out, but dig out a roadway for some distance ahead. In this manner he worked his way on for six days when he found the supplies for his family and team were about used up, with more than half the distance yet to go. Hopefully he worked on for another day and reached a high and slightly bluff on the river a short distance from Armstrong Grove, where he decided to leave his family and try and reach the settlement on foot for help.

Early in the morning he parted from them and started out on the prairie, still hoping they might in some way be saved. He was so worn out that at his best he could only make very slow headway, so that when night came on he was still a wanderer. Fortunately for him, as well as for his family, he heard the barking of a dog. This he followed up until about nine o'clock when John James, of Black Cat

creek settlement, heard him calling for help and went out with his lantern and found him and took him to his cabin. He told Mr. James about his family, their condition and where they could be found. Mr. James at once hurried down the creek, some one and a half miles, to Mr. Reibhoff's, and informed them. The news was quickly carried to the others in the settlement—William B. Moore, Robert R. Moore and Horace Schenck—who hastened to meet together at Mr. Reibhoff's for the purpose of sending out a relief party with as little delay as possible.

When Peter Reibhoff, George Tuttle, John James and John Cullinder offered their services all hands went to work so that they might be off at an early hour. While the men folks were busy making sleds to carry their supplies, the women were equally busy in cooking and gathering the articles needed for the trip. Everything seemed to be well arranged for this party, when Mr. Schenck thought it would be best for another party to go out lightly loaded, so as to reach the family as quickly as possible. With this in view he came to our cabin, three miles away, about four o'clock in the morning, and told us about the family and what had been done, and then with great earnestness and much feeling told us what he still thought should be done, and asked us to make up a party to reach the sleigh with as little loss of time as might be. Our sympathies were all enlisted from the start, so that when he had finished I turned to William S. Campbell, who was stopping with us at the time, and said, "What do you say?" His quick reply was, "If you go, I shall be with you."

While breakfast was being prepared, the sleds were brought in, tent cover and blankets were rolled up and bound to them, also an axe to each. As the other party had a great supply of provisions we did not wait to prepare any and only took what we could gather from the table for our lunch. At the first signs of day we were off and soon found out that the morning was cold, and as usual we had a strong

northwest wind to face. About eleven o'clock the sky clouded over and soon after we were in one of those blustering snow storms so common at that day. At times it seemed as if we should have to turn back, or go to the timber for protection, and yet when we thought of the family that had been waiting so long for help, we nerved up all the stronger and pushed on. About one o'clock we discovered a break in the clouds at the horizon, and by three o'clock the storm had passed by. We now saw the sleigh some two miles away directly in front of us. This distance was quickly covered and when we walked up to it, so uncertain as to what we should find, and gave one of the bows of the cover a vigorous shake and asked, "How are you getting along?" we for once, at least, listened to a quick response, and such expressions of thankfulness as we had never heard before and probably never will again. This was followed by earnest appeals from Mrs. Johnson to her little girl, Mary, not to die, as help had come, repeating it over and over again, evidently in hopes of getting some expression from her showing that she was still alive. During this time Campbell, who was standing at my side, spoke the feelings of both when he said, "I am glad we came."

We now told Mrs. Johnson to be quiet as possible, and when we got a fire started and camp ready we would come and get them. When she heard the word "fire," it seemed to have the desired effect, as she had seen none for some time. We went down to the river bottom near at hand, where Campbell began cutting wood, while I cleared away a site for a camp in some four feet of snow with one of my snow shoes. When this was done and the support poles were in place we spread the heavy canvas for a cover and fastened it down close to the ground on all sides but the open front. A fire was soon started and then with the rubber blanket spread out on the ground, with the Mackinaws and buffalo robe covering it, we had a really comfortable appearing camp, although the mercury was some thirty degrees below zero.

A big fire was now in order, and when the camp was thoroughly warmed we hastened to the sleigh just above us on the bluff and found the family all unconscious but Mrs. Johnson, and all helpless and unable to move. We took the little boy of some twelve years of age, and Mary, about ten, out from between the heavy feather ticks and carried them to camp, apparently beyond the need of help, and then Mrs. Johnson with her infant child was placed beside them.

From now on we had plenty to do in keeping up the fire. Up to this time we had been so occupied that we had entirely forgotten the other party, as they had not put in their appearance. Hoping to aid them in finding our camp, we began firing guns at frequent intervals, and kept it up until quite late, when we gave up seeing them for the night.

By this time the young folks had warmed up and regained consciousness, and much to our relief we heard no complaining from the camp. The night soon passed and then at break of day we began firing guns again. This was kept up until about eight o'clock, when we had our first response from down the river. Another gun was fired, and then another response from nearer by was soon followed by the appearance of John James on the bluff overlooking our camp. He told us the rest of the party were down the river about five miles in a well hole in the snow where they had stayed over night without a fire. I now told him we had the family all safe, and we wanted something to eat, and to try and hurry up the provision party in quick time. A short time before noon they reached our camp, when we enjoyed their provisions while they appeared to enjoy our fire fully as well. The cattle were fed, and when dinner was over the sleigh was loaded up again, cattle hitched on, and with two long ropes fastened to the sleigh and passing by on either side, with a couple of men to each, we were ready for a start. As I remember the picture just at that time it would not have been taken for a rapid transit outfit.

We reached a fine ash grove on an island in the river a

short distance above the mouth of Mud creek before night, where we stopped to camp. The weather during the day had become more moderate, and the wind had quieted down. With plenty of help we made good preparations for the night. During the evening about the camp fire we listened to the experiences of the relief party while hauling their heavy loads during the storm the day before, also about the night spent in the snow well without a fire, that no one of that party is liable ever to forget.

In comparing notes we found that all of us were more or less frozen about the hands and face while beating up against the storm. Bright and early we were up, and when breakfast was over we packed up again and were off, with everybody feeling well satisfied with the work so far accomplished.

Before noon Campbell and I left the party some two miles out from Mr. Riebhoff's and went to our cabin. Soon after the whole settlement was gladdened by the safe arrival of the family, and vied with each other in offering them the hospitality of their homes. They finally accepted of Mr. and Mrs. Schenck's invitation, as they had more spare room to offer, where they stayed until warm weather, when they went on their way with the best wishes of all who knew them and with memories that are not liable ever to be forgotten.

MR. LE CLAIRE has laid out from 80 to 100 lots, for which he can give a good warrantee deed. These lots are situated in the most beautiful part of the village. He proposes to sell on favorable terms to persons wishing to build and take up their residence amongst us. He is also laying out and will shortly offer for sale, a number of 4-acre lots. Want of room forbids us saying more at this time. We shall say more on this subject hereafter.—*Davenport (Iowa) Sun, May 15, 1839.*

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