

Decatur County Journal

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EARLY FARM METHODS

J.N. MACHLAN Tells How it was Done in the Pioneer Days of Decatur County.

Through the kindness of the JOURNAL EDITOR we are permitted to give to the young a glimpse of farm life in the early days of Decatur County.

My parents erected a little cabin in the brush near the present site of the county bridge, on Little River, west from the Fairview School House, and called it home; e're long my father with a good team of horses and an old fashioned sod plow began to cut and turn the virgin soil preparatory to raising a crop. The plowman's necessary equipments for success were as follows: plenty of patience, a whip, a plow file, a heavy hammer and a hunk of iron, to use as an anvil on which to cold hammer the plowshare occasionally; the file to put the finishing touch on with; and the patience came in good play when he encountered a stone, a root, or some obstacle that jerked the plow, plowman and all clear out of the furrow. There were also numerous snakes to contend with, the rattle snakes, the bull snake, the hissing viper, the blue racer, the house snake, the garter snake, the green joint snake, the blue black joint snake and a few other species, besides the nasty lizzards that could be seen by the hundreds.

Now as the virgin soil had been turned bottom side up and time had arrived for corn planting, we proceeded to plant corn by one of the following methods; by axing it in, hoeing it in, healing it in or dropping by hand following the plow every third round and dropping the grain on top of the furrow, at such a place that the next furrow would barely cover it with its upper edge. This would produce what we called a crop of sod corn either good or bad according to the season and condition of the sod. Plenty of rain was generally essential to a good crop. It was also essential for the sod to be well rotted. Scores of snakes would be cut in twain with the plow every season, among which a great many rattle snakes became victims of the cruel plowshare. The early settlers did not have implement stores to which they could go and purchase farming tools, but were compelled of necessity to make them.

When the ground was in condition for harrowing, we set to work with three sticks of timber some four or five inches square and perhaps six feet in length and frame or bolt them together, which when joined, would be a good representation of the letter A, next with an inch and a half or a two inch auger we bored holes in the side pieces and cross section into which we inserted huge pegs made from good hickory or oak timber, then sharpened the lower end of the pegs and our harrow was completed. Our wooden harrow rotted down in the fence corner after many years of good service. A few years later, the sod tearer was invented, it was such a peculiarly constructed implement that to the writer it baffles description, therefore, we beg leave to not attempt it; however, it did pretty good work at that time.

Much of the virgin soil contained so many tough roots it was not uncommon to see a furrow of sod one-half mile long without a break in it. Some of the toughest roots were, the wild indigo, shoe string, blue stem, rosin weed and some times a patch of hazel or buck brush. The rosin weed above referred to produced a white gum which constituted the chewing gum of the yough of the early settlers.

After a few months spent in the little cabin in the brush, we decided to venture out onto the broad, bleak prairie and erect another log cabin which we did in course of time. A well was dug which furnished water for the house, but for years our stock had to be taken across the prairie to some creek or spring to quench their thirst and as for ourselves when working in the field or on the prairie making hay, we have

many times drank from a puddle containing many angle worms, crawfish and bugs, the water would often be warm enough for dish water.

Time rolls on and it becomes necessary to fence our farm; the father proceeded to the timber some eleven miles distant and splits rails and hauls them and a fence is built called a worm fence, which when completed is from seven to ten rails in height; but soon a new difficulty arose, more settlers were coming in, fires were started in the prairie grass; some were started by accident, some purposely and on quite a few occasions, campers have left fire where they had stopped for the night, the wind would rise and the fire would be scattered. Soon a conflagration would be raging across the prairies and perhaps hundreds or even thousands of acres would be burned over before the fire went out. In many cases the fires would burn all night. It was at such times that our rail fences would suffer destruction and how to prevent the loss we soon grasped an idea. The fires of course, would do most of the mischief in the spring, and at some convenient time we would plow a few furrows around the farm near the fence then perhaps two or three rods farther from the fence, we would plow a few more, the strip between we called a fireland. At the favorable time, when the wind was not blowing (generally of an evening) father would say, "Well boys, this is a good time to burn out those firelands." Of course, this pleased the boys and after the day's work was done we equipped ourselves with small boards and brush to fight fire with and on some occasions we would take along from one to three barrels of water; in case fire should get into the fence. All things ready, we commenced firing along the side so the fire would have to burn against the wind, but it matters not how calm it was, when the fire was started the hot air rising creates a vacuum and the cold air rushing in to take its place would cause a breeze and sometimes the fire would get beyond control, despite our best efforts and sometimes we would not reach home until a very late hour in the night.

A weed, well known to early settlers, called the tumble weed or careless weed, which grew in great numbers on new cultivated land, the tops of which were almost spherical in shape and ranging in diameter from twelve to thirty-six inches, when assisted by a breeze would carry fire for some distance. They were so near round they would roll for miles without stopping when a stiff wind was blowing.

When the soil had become well rotted and the corn big enough to need attention, we plowed it with a cultivator having but one shovel which was made from a triangular shaped piece of iron, with which it was necessary to plow two rounds to each row of corn. The cultivator was used in the field more or less until the silk made its appearance on the young ears of corn. The worst weed we had to contend with in the corn field in those days, was a species of smart weed, rarely seen except on new land. It grew down close to the ground and had a firm grip upon it. Hoes were extensively used in those days in the corn fields. Another advance step was taken in the method of planting corn, the cultivator referred to is used to draw a shallow furrow for each row of corn, the corn is then dropped into the furrow about every three feet, then covered either with a hoe or by cross harrowing. Three of us dropping and one furrowing off, planting as much as seven acres in a day.

The time had come when we were raising a little spring wheat, oats and flax. The method of threshing grain after it had been harvested with the cradling scythe and is well cured was to prepare a circular piece of ground usually from sixteen to twenty feet in diameter by taking a sharp spade and shaving off the surface until it is quite smooth and level; after this was done a pole some eight or ten feet high was set upright in a hole dug in the center of the circular patch of ground, to this pole usually two horses abreast are tied with long ropes and a lad mounted on one of the horses with a small gad, the grain had been evenly spread upon the prepared ground and the horses were started on a long tramp, tramping out the grain on the new tramping floor, a process that was very monotonous to the horses, and speaking from experience, the rider was very glad when the noon hour or nightfall had arrived. The grain during the tramping process was turned over with a forked stick and as soon the grain was tramped out the straw was removed and the grain gathered up and winnowed out, a fresh supply was spread upon the

floor and the tramping process was continued.

The snowfall during some of the winters was very heavy. I believe it was in the winter of 1866, we arose one morning and discovered that the snow had drifted to the eaves of the little cabin, our fences were all snowed under and our stock scattered hither and thither and our enclosures for stock were all under snow. After the snow fell the weather turned colder and the snow froze hard. We could drive in any direction across the prairie over high fences. We had just put out a washing before the snow and it was six weeks before we were enabled to find it all. Heavy snows were common but this one was the heaviest I ever saw. Our cabin was covered with clapboards, as was the custom in those days, and the snow would blow between them and sift down through the loft into our faces as we lay in bed during a snow storm. The last thing the good mother would do before retiring was to see if the five children were in bed covered up head and all so the snow would not lodge in our faces. It was a common occurrence after a snow storm had subsided, for someone of the family to ascend to the loft and scoop the snow out before it melted.

As we pass along it might be well to describe the bedsteads installed in some of the cabins. One method of constructing a bedstead was to place a log in the walls angling across the corner of the cabin at a convenient height into which pegs were set about six inches apart, a small rope was then procured and strung back and forth from the pegs in the lot to corresponding pegs in the walls of the cabin. A later method of construction was to procure two round poles to serve as side rails, set the pegs into them, fasten them to corner posts, nail on end rails then string the pegs with rope and the bedstead was completed.

No cabin was complete without the fireplace, the hearth of which was laid of brick or stone and the chimney usually built of brick or stone, or wooden slats built up in mud or lime mortar. In our cabin, the hearth was made of flat lime stone under which the rats burrowed and made nests and reared their young, and as their disgusting habits are nocturnal, the saucy little rodents would emerge from beneath the hearth during the night, especially in the winter, and skip about the fire evidently warming themselves and eating such things as suited their taste. They would sometimes bite some of the family or anyone who chanced to be there during the night. My brother, who resides in Des Moines, was bitten on the great toe while asleep. A servant girl, who was employed to assist with the household duties, was also bitten whereupon she yelled out "murder," but as that was a common expression with some people in those days when they were frightened, hurt or alarmed, the family thought nothing of the expression, but someone proceeded to make a light to ascertain how badly she was bitten.

The various kinds of lights used in those days were, first the grease light, consisting of a saucer or pan containing grease with a rag placed in it with one end standing above the grease, which when lighted served to light the cabin. Next came the grease lamp, then the tallow candle.

When the sod had become well rotted, watermelons, pumpkins and potatoes did quite well. Among the various kinds of potatoes grown were: the calico, white meshanic, California peach blow, long red and lady finger; the long red being the most prolific of any grown.

For several years after Iowa became a State, apples were hauled in from Missouri, many of them coming from what was known as the famous crab orchard. So called because the apple scions were grafted into the root of the wild crab. The first apples the writer ever saw growing, were in the small orchard of young trees planted on the old homestead. I think there were less than a dozen of them which were guarded very closely lest something befell them before they matured.

After the chaff-piling threshing machine was introduced, the threshing of grain was not so great a task as

it formerly was, but as the straw carrier had not yet been invented, it became necessary to remove the straw and chaff from the rear end of the machine, either with horses or by some other method, any of which were very disagreeable, as the chaff and dust would fill the eyes, nose, ears and mouth, if you should fail to keep it shut; but being as it was, it was quite an improvement over the tramping floor method.

Thinking there might be profit in sheep raising, we purchased a flock of two or three hundred, with a guarantee from the owner that none of them were more than four years old, but soon they began to die of old age and we discovered we were beaten in the deal, however, we kept on trying. We had plenty of range, but they must have a shepherd, which lot usually fell upon the writer, and permit me to say it was a very monotonous, lonesome occupation watching sheep on the broad prairie, and not a human being in sight for hours at a time. For years we were compelled to lot the sheep at night near the cabin, to prevent the wolves from killing them, but even then they would get among them and kill the lambs. One day while the writer was tending the sheep a short distance from the cabin, a wolf came into the flock and seizing a lamb by the back of the neck and trotted off with it. I waved my stick that I usually carried vigorously in the air and yelled with the force I could summon, the wolf dropped the lamb and I took it to the cabin, but it was so badly injured it only lived a few days. Our flock increased and the extremely old ones died off and we had better success for a while. In our flock was a large fellow with curled horns; he had been teased quite a little and had become quite mischievous. On a certain occasion, by accident the sheep became imprisoned in the smoke house; some member of the family had closed the door, not knowing that he was in there. The servant of the kitchen, who was commonly called an old maid, went to the smoke house for something to serve for dinner meal and on opening the door, the sheep made a dive for her, running between her feet, carrying her for a long distance, bleating as if in great agony, while the maid was screaming and trying to alight from his back. The situation seemed a critical one as the sheep did not know how to unload his burden and the maid feared trying to let loose for fear of getting hurt in the attempt, but finally by some kind of maneuvers they came out of the fracas none the worse for wear, save being a little frightened. Another advance had been made in the corn cultivator which then had two shovels instead of one and a row of corn was plowed every round of the horse and plowman, which was quite gratifying to the farmer. But while this was true, new and additional weeds were added to the farmers' list of pests among which were the milk weed and the black eyed swan, both of which are with us unto the present day. The black eyed swan was introduced into this country as a garden flower by some English people. Time rolls around and the rats under the old hearth having increased in numbers and boldness, as well, they became almost unbearable and father set traps and caught quite a number of them. The cabin all being in one room, we could watch them by the light of the fireplace from all quarters of the room and I must say it was amusing to see father spring out of bed, on hearing the trap spring, and kill the rat, set the trap again and retire, sometimes only remaining in bed but a short time when he would spring up and repeat the operation. Someone prescribed a remedy for getting rid of the saucy rodents; it was as follows: Catch a rat, singe it over the fire and turn it loose and the rats would all take a leave of absence. Father caught the rat but his heart failed him when it came to the singeing process and the rat never got singed. So much for rat trapping around the old fireside. Other improvements had been made to facilitate corn planting. A farmer a few miles distant had purchased a two horse planter for about \$75 and we could hire it for about 15 cents per acre. The ground when ready to plant was first marked off with a kind of sled, the first one to appear made two marks at a time, in a few years someone made an improvement on the marker and it made three marks at a time. About this time we thought we would cap the climax. We made two wooden axles that would fit our wagon wheels, one short and one long one, coupled them together and made four marks at a time, which was easy on the team and by this improvement, forty acres could be marked off in a few hours. The ground being marked, two persons, a driver and a dropper, a team of horses and the new corn planter, would plant from ten to fifteen acres per day. The most common variety of corn planted those days was the bloody butcher, although more or less white corn was grown.

A threshing machine had been introduced with a short straw carrier attachment known as the Buffalo Pitts, which was quite an improvement over the old chaff piler. In connection with the Buffalo Pitts thresher was introduced a system of tallying the number of bushels of grain threshed. It consisted mainly of a board attached to the side of the machine where the grain came out. It had a number of one-fourth inch holes in it arranged in rows into which pegs were moved for each bushel of grain threshed. The board would tally up to one thousand bushels, when it became necessary to commence again at the first. By this time Osceola had a railroad. The Leon merchants had their goods shipped to Osceola and hired them hauled in wagons across the country. Engaged in the hauling of goods was a MR. HUGHES, MR. GOINS, MR. LINDSEY and others, all of whom were residents of Leon. MR. HUGHES was engaged at a certain time in hauling shingles. One day while enroute for Leon with a load of shingles his horses became frightened and ran away, scattering shingles along the highway for some distance. MR. HUGHES received the name "shingle sower".

Another step forward was taken and the two-horse cultivator was being introduced to the farmers. We bargained for a Blackhawk walking cultivator, with the firm of Richards & Close, whose ad appeared in the Decatur County Journal of that time. The plow was delivered at our gate at the old homestead by the MR. HUGHES referred to, while enroute to Leon. The plow I believe cost \$35 and was the first two-horse cultivator the writer ever saw and pardon me for saying, it gives me pleasure still to look at the old cultivator, the principal parts of which are in good condition, and with some repairs it is still used by its purchaser in north Leon, to cultivate garden truck or anything that needs cultivation.

Going back now to the days and nights in the little cabin where things had been moving along quietly for some time with a new house maid assisting with the indoor work; until one night the family was startled by an unusual noise in the house, a light was struck and we discovered that the maid of all work had taken her departure. A member of the family was dispatched to search for the missing maiden, after a brief search she was found a few rods from the house taking a ride on father's old shaving horse. She was escorted back to the cabin and persuaded to retire again and on being told of her conduct, the following morning, she was horror stricken. It was a bad case of insomnia (sic) and for a long time afterward the family was often startled in the night by her queer actions.

In the early days of Decatur County, considerable hay and grain was stolen. Movers and travelers going across the country would often steal their horse feed and take rails from the fences and make fuel out of them. One farmer, however, got even with a mover. He had missed some rails from his fence and mounting a horse, went after him and overtaking him before he reached Osceola, made him pay 50 cents each for the rails he had burned. The farmers would often see them in the act. The writer on one occasion caught some young well dressed fellows stealing hay. I asked what they did that for and they asked me to set a price, which I did. They said that it wasn't any too much and paid the price and drove on.

Good blooded horses were very scarce, but at the same time there were a good many good, serviceable horses on the farms, among which were the Canadian horses, as they were called, that were excellent all service animals.

The first hogs were the well known hazel splitters or razor backs that were allowed to rove the prairie at will, and you might imagine yourself among the brush or in the tall prairie grass, with a salamander in your hand searching for a hog to butcher or one that might have a family of pigs to care for, it was not uncommon to fail in finding a young litter of swine until they were several days old. As to cattle, they were just cattle and a conglomeration of colors and kinds. They all had horns and most of them good long ones. There were some excellent milchers (sic) and some expert kickers among them.

Now, one more happening in the cabin on the old homestead and we will bring these very incomplete

sketches to a close. One very cold winter day as the family were seated about the old fireplace, a muffled rap was heard at the door, someone of the family went to the door, pulled the string that lifted the wooden latch, the door swung on its hinges and there stood a gentleman of perhaps thirty summers, who asked permission to come in and warm. The privilege being instantly granted he was proffered a chair by the fire which he soon occupied, and immediately began to slip off a pair of new boots, which seemed rather tight for him, but after a few hard pulls he succeeded in getting them off. It was not long, however, until he was warm and contemplated resuming his journey. He seizes one of his boots, gives it several vigorous pulls, but as his feet had swollen while sitting by the fire, he fails to make the boot go on for the time being, but he soon mastered the situation; he called for some soft soap, which was soon given him, after which he proceeded to grease his heels thoroughly, the boots went on and although the gentleman was from Missouri, he didn't have to be shown, and we learned another Yankee trick.

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