

# WHAT PIONEERING MEANS.

By W. D. ALBRIGHT.

This article, written for the "Farmer's Advocate" by Mr. Albright, who, before settling at Beaverlodge, was Editor of that well-known Agricultural Journal, should be of interest to all Canadians Overseas who have their eyes turned to the Peace River Country.—Ed.

"My soul is sick of cities, and the crafty strife;  
And if gold were all and greed were all, I  
have had enough of life.  
But ever in my dreams I hear the moor-  
land music creep  
To the heart that shall be aching till I  
sleep."

Pioneering nearly always spells privation. World over, it is the price exacted by Nature for Virgin Opportunity. Subduing the wilderness is a man's job. Sometimes lightly undertaken, it usually presents trials before which all the most buoyant optimism, firm fixed faith, and grim resolution quail. Not always is the pursuit willingly continued. Thousands of fields in Eastern Canada smile production to-day because the axmen who hewed them from the forest had naught but Hobson's choice. Once staked in the New World they had no means of returning to the Old. It was "root hog, or die."

I have often speculated that one reason the Canadian West settled so slowly during the closing decades of the last century was because railroads made it over-easy for disheartened homesteaders to return east. However, we cannot compel people to pioneer. Nor do we need to do so. Ingrained in the character of the hardy races of the world is an instinct of wanderlust, interknit with land hunger, independence and derring-do, which speeds pathfinders blazing the way from tropic to pole. Some of these have not only the courage to adventure, but fortitude to stick. They are the founders of Empire—the true pioneers.

In these present days of far-flung bands of steel the frontier is more easily accessible than it was when our grandparents huddled for weeks or months in steerage passage on storm-tossed sailing craft to penetrate the forest fastnesses in the centre of a strange continent, to fashion there homes and clothing by their own ingenuity, to clear the land a tree at a time, and to wrest a living from Nature's rugged wild. To-day the homesteaders in New Ontario or the Peace River Valley may step off a Pullman car and travel by fairly good trails five, fifty or a hundred miles to the proximity of his own quarter section. Half a mile from where I write is the pleasant hamlet of Beaverlodge with a well-managed general store, a money-order post office, a telegraph office, a police station, blacksmith shop, hotel, music hall, a school and a church. Automobiles whizz past by the score. Twelve miles east is a chartered bank, and a good doctor in reach by phone and telegraph. Sixteen miles further east is steel head at the busy town of Grande Prairie, where, in addition to many first-class stores, are three elevators, the Dominion Lands Office, a high school, a hospital, a few doctors and several lawyers—sure sign of sophistication—or would you say civilization? Of course, Beaverlodge is no longer a Mecca for landseekers. Its real pioneer days are already a thing of the past, although

stray homesteads are still being culled out of the leavings round us. Bulk of settlement, however, is now some twenty-five to fifty miles beyond. But note this: The first trickle of white settlers reached Beaverlodge valley only ten years ago, trekking five hundred and fifty miles by ox team over crude trails to get here. First come first served is the principle that ever lures settlement beyond the end of steel and renders homesteading a somewhat adventurous quest. Legislative effort has feebly sought to restrict it to more accessible regions, but the pioneer is impatient of restraint, and the politician who essays it is liable to have his attempts turned against him in days to come when the new settlement has become an electoral factor. Nevertheless, we may look for advantageous developments in the wise direction of homesteading.

Even within the touch of the eddies of civilized intercourse, pioneering is not child's play. For a bachelor it is lonesome and crude; for a family man it is responsible and fairly arduous in the early days. One must do so much on a homestead before he is in a position to produce anything worth while. Shack and stables are to be built, probably a well to dig, land cleared, broken and fenced, equipment and supplies regularly obtained. Meanwhile his fund of cash dribbles away for hardware, blacksmith bills, working stock, tools and implements, feed, seed, "grubstake" boots, clothing, and a few wonted comforts or luxuries, and first thing he knows frost or fire or grasshoppers or hail—there is scarcely any hail in the Peace River country, but it has been known to occur—or something else catches his promising crop just when he is depending upon it to lift him off the rocks. Fortunate, then, if he can start all over again in production without having first to drag himself from under the burden of debt. I have yet to see the first settler, however provident, whose stock of ready money did not run low sooner than he expected. Wise the intending homesteader who first of all puts aside half his capital to be left untouched save in case of dire emergency. Let him choose to finance himself with the remainder no matter how inadequate it may appear. Many seeming necessities are not necessities at all save in the imagination. A thousand dollars can be made to go a long way if eked out by working for more forehanded neighbours. There is plenty of chance to do this, and no one will be thought less for doing so. New districts are wholesomely rational and democratic. The small house, the crude stable, the limited stock and working equipment with a reserve of cash to fall back upon in case of sickness or disaster are far more prudent and profitable than the ambitious start. The man who starts by cutting a wide swath very often peters out, while a modest beginning commonly leads to expanding success. Thrift, thrift, and yet more thrift, should be the watchword.

With the thriftiest methods homesteading

furnishes its full quota of disappointments. It is the history of new countries. It is as though Nature were disposed to try out by the chastening rod all who would ravage her pristine beauty. Last July after the unprecedented midsummer frost which spread so widely over Northern Alberta and Saskatchewan, a knot of farmers were discussing the situation. "Well, I've sown three crops now and haven't threshed any yet. I'm going to sow another next year," spoke one, an Ontarioan who had found his way to Grande Prairie via the Dakota route. His quarter was in the bush and especially liable to frost. Superb was the temper with which frost devastation was faced. The dauntless spirit of our Canadian soldiers was exemplified on the frontier by our pioneers. The situation at that time looked ominous enough, yet jokes and quips were on everyone's lips, quiet resolution in nearly everyone's eye. The country had been shipped clean of grain, and it looked as though there might be neither bread, seed, nor chicken feed. A Norwegian recalled a folk tale of how, during the closing years of the Napoleonic war frost ravaged his native land and the people went up into the mountains and gathered moss for human food. Some one suggested that we might have to live on willow roots and rabbits without the rabbits. "Oh, we laugh now," remarked a neighbour, "but it may be serious enough by and by." Yet he, too, was prepared to carry on. Such is the mettle of the Peace River pioneers.

In the end, our case did not prove half bad after all. Crops recovered amazingly. The writer has experimental plots of oats which are running nearly a hundred and twenty bushels per acre, spring wheat thirty to forty, and winter rye fifty-seven. A plot of early planted potatoes yielded at the rate of four hundred bushels per acre notwithstanding considerable setback. Some currants and raspberries bore well, the latter fruiting right through September. Saskatoons, blueberries, cranberries and strawberries fruited as usual. Sweet peas, asters, pansies and other flowers ornamented the garden until October. All staple vegetables produced abundantly, even squash and tomatoes being matured in small quantities. There is likely to be plenty of seed on the Prairie, is certainly plenty of feed grain and lashions of rough feed. No one is likely to go hungry or cold. But if we had done so the majority would cheerfully have made the best of it all. That is what successful pioneering calls for.

Allusion has been made to the loneliness of "batching" on a homestead. It is mitigated by visiting and by changing work. Still there are many days when one comes in tired from a solitary job of grubbing and plowing to enter a cold, dreary shack, prepare a plain meal, eat it in silence, and go back to repeat the process at night, and the next day and the next. I fancy many a soldier who endures with supreme heroism the tests of battle and trench life would shrink from the drab tedium of a self-imposed existence on the homestead, with no vow of allegiance to hold his purpose fixed and no camaraderie to buoy up his spirits. Man is a social and a connubial being. In his home life he desires the aesthetic feminine touch. I know bachelors who are excellent housekeepers and first-class cooks, baking bread in place of bannock and pies, as well as potatoes. But their shacks are not homes in the full sense. There is no woman there.

Two years ago in an article in the Christmas "Advocate," I quoted a bit of parody verse composed by my hired man, a cheery

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