

Experiences of a Homesteader

By JOHN WILSON
Concluded from Last Week

As a Hired Girl

An experience I shall not soon forget was a couple of weeks at threshing time when I took on the job of cooking for the gang. Homesteaders have to work at all kinds of jobs sometimes, but they have not all had the distinction of working out as a "hired girl." It was stook threshing and there were twenty men on the job, including the bachelor farmer for whom I first cooked and his men, and though the thresherman's appetite is proverbial, I never realized before how much food men could really eat. I prepared the day before the threshers arrived by baking a big batch of apple and raisin pies—not "like mother used to make" but solid and substantial at least—and a bushel or so of doughnuts, which did not prove so satisfying. The outfit started work at 6 a.m., so breakfast, consisting of beefsteak and potatoes had to be ready at five, which meant that I had to be on the job at four. I cooked roast beef for dinner and boiled beef for supper, with potatoes, cabbage and turnips from the garden, and pie-or-apple sauce, prunes or rice pudding at each meal. Supper was at seven, so that the men were working out doors for twelve hours a day besides doing their chores, and they had a right to be hungry. But while they worked twelve hours I put in seventeen with hardly a minute that I was not on the go. The actual cooking did not seem a great deal of work, but the jobs of dish washing and potato peeling and the constant trips for water to a well a quarter of a mile away, made me glad I was not a woman all the time. I made quite a hit as a cook though, and my fame evidently spread, for when the outfit moved on after a week's work the next farmer they went to got me to go along and help his wife. Sleeping accommodation was scarce and at night when the supper dishes were washed, potatoes peeled, steak cut and wood made ready for the morning, I found myself a resting place on a pile of bagged potatoes, in the log stable in the stall next to old "Dan" who used to be a trotting stallion, but now helps pull the plow. Potatoes may be considered a hard bed, but if they were, I did not know it, for I had no sooner lain down, it seemed to me, before I saw a lantern flash and heard someone say, "Ho, Cookie—quarter of four—get up."

Xmas on the Homestead

I was away from the homestead for six weeks in the early winter, earning a few much needed dollars, and so had to remain until the end of January to complete my second year's residence duties. This, of course, meant Christmas on the homestead. I had spent the pre-

vious Christmas on the prairie, but that was shortly after I had commenced homesteading and when I was full enough of enthusiasm to enjoy anything that had the spice of novelty about it. The first Christmas day I spent at the home of my friend Shepley, with three other bachelor guests. It was different from any Christmas I had ever spent before, but not the least enjoyable by any means. We had very little of the usual paraphernalia of Christmastime. There was no Christmas tree, no holly, no mistletoe, and no girls to kiss under it if there had been. But what really counts at Christmas is a spirit of goodwill, a good dinner and a good appetite to enjoy it. We had all of these. Shepley had been to town and might have stayed there over the festive season, but he would not disappoint the rest of us, and came back the night before with a pair of nice fat ducks and a plum pudding. We all contributed something to the bill of fare, and took turns at cooking and sawing wood outside so that all should have appetites appropriate to the occasion. Chicken soup preceded the roast duck, and plum pudding and mince pies followed, and the feeling of sweet content that seemed to steal over us all when we drew around the stove after dinner, made us forget the homesickness which we all no doubt felt, but which no one spoke about.

The second Christmas was different. We had by this time extended our acquaintance considerably, and had discovered that there were some ladies living in the neighborhood after all. We started to celebrate on Christmas Eve, and with two teams and sleighs gathered up a merry party of nearly twenty. We first went to a Doukhobor village, and with one of the ladies of the party dressed as Santa Claus, beard and all, visited each house leaving toys for the children and having a great time generally. Then we went off to another village, where the Catholic members of the party attended service before we returned home in the early hours of the morning. The festivities were renewed as soon as we had had a few hours' sleep and had done our chores, and the whole neighborhood started on a round of visits which lasted till the New Year.

Social Life on the Prairie

Sometimes a bunch of a dozen or more would descend unannounced upon some unsuspecting bachelor just as he was preparing for bed and proceed to make ourselves at home in his shack. In case his pantry should not be well supplied, we always took some eatables along, as well as a few packs of cards and usually some kind of musical instrument. When travelling on the prairie at night one is apt to get lost, so being careful people we generally waited for daylight and breakfast before dispersing. Those were good times, and no one who has not taken part in the social life of a prairie settlement can understand how enjoyable it can be made.

When I went to town in the fall, I had sold the cow and a newly arrived calf, and disposed of the oxen for the winter by lending them to another homesteader, who undertook to care for them till spring in return for the use of them in hauling logs, fence posts and firewood from the bush. I could not get what I considered a fair price for the cow and calf in cash, which was a very scarce article in that district then, so I sold them for twelve acres of breaking to be done the following summer, this work being worth \$36 at the price prevailing in the district.

Putting in the Crop

At the beginning of February, having two years' duties done, I went to Winnipeg, where I worked at various jobs until spring. I saved a little money during this time, sold some lots which I had bought before I homesteaded, and with all the money I could scrape up returned to the farm in time for seeding. I bought another yoke of oxen, horses still being beyond my means, and got an old seeder cheap from a man who was buying a new one. Then when I had seeded my forty acres with wheat I went to work breaking again, and with four oxen on the plow made better time than the previous summer, sometimes turning over two acres a day. I hired

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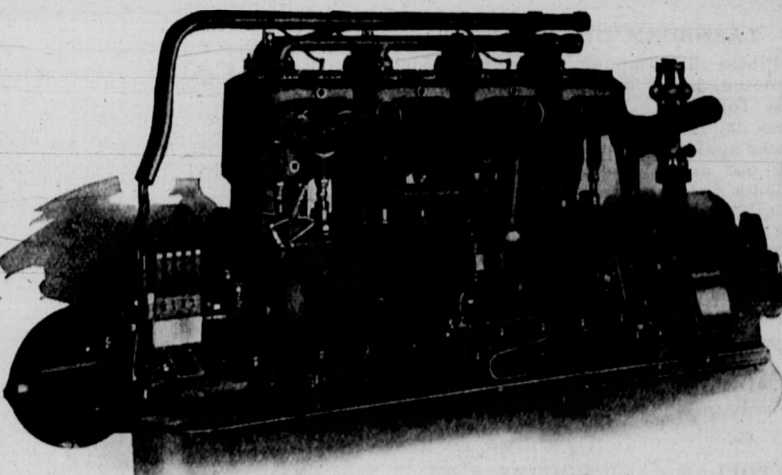
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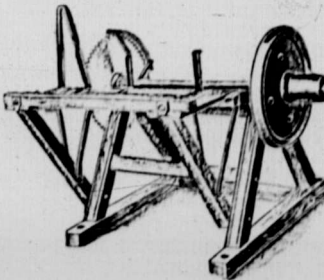
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