



The Tale of the Pioneers



In the "Pioneer Stories" submitted for prizes in "The Farmer's Advocate" competition, there was a similarity of incident and experience that made it very hard for the judges to arrive at a decision. All were interesting, but practically every story covered the same ground. Almost every one began with a description of the wearisome trip across the ocean, lasting from four to seventeen weeks, and then went on to describe the journey into the wilderness to the new home. In all of them, with only slight variations in detail, were descriptions of the building of the log houses and barns, the clearing of the land, and the hardships endured before the country was settled and ordinary conveniences could be secured. Apparently, all the early grist-mills were located in the most inaccessible places, for in every case the pioneers had to carry their wheat, often on their backs, from seven to forty miles to be ground. One interesting feature of these stories is the constant reference to the terrors endured by the first settlers on account of the wolves, and, strange to say, the evidence tends to prove that these terrors were groundless. In his "Manual of the Vertebrates of Ontario," Mr. C. W. Nash says regarding the wolves: "We sometimes see in the newspapers accounts of attacks upon travellers by these animals. These are pure fiction. That the European wolf, when pressed by hunger, will sometimes attack a man, is no doubt true, but so far there is no authentic case known where a wolf attacked a man in this country." The pioneer stories submitted in the competition bear out this statement. Although all of them speak of the constant howling of the wolves and the fears of the settlers, not one gives an incident of anyone being killed, injured or attacked by wolves. Apparently, the howl of the Canadian wolf was much worse than his bite. It is also to be borne in mind that the recollections of circumstances and conditions occurring, perhaps, half a century ago, while correct in the main, may not always be mathematically accurate. No two persons will give a similar account of something that happened on the street yesterday, because their viewpoint, faculties of observation and memory do not correspond. Peter McArthur, with whose sketches our readers are familiar, takes an intense interest in pioneer history, and, in delving through the manuscripts, he observes that, though the stories were so similar in character and merit, all differed in some respects. Each contained some incident or description that cast its own peculiar light on the lives of the pioneers. In order that these may be put on record, the most notable have been selected for publication. Taken together, they probably cast more light on pioneer days than could the experiences of any one person. Here are a couple of characteristic glimpses from the sketch submitted by Wm. G. Hislop, Stratford:

"The good man at last tackled a maple two feet through. His method was to cut round and round, which resulted in the tree falling anywhere, just close to the shanty site. However, by main strength, seasoned with a good deal of perseverance, the spot was cleared, and real building begun. Buck and Bright" (all pioneer oxen appear to have been called Buck and Bright) "must now play their part. Not many logs were drawn when the yoke broke. The yoke made to take the place of the one broken was a 'peach.' It would make a fine exhibition to-day."

"As there were children in the house, the want of milk was beginning to be felt. After a good many attempts, the father succeeded in getting a cow. This addition to the farm stock caused some anxiety as to feed for the winter. Some rough hay was secured from a beaver meadow a mile distant, but the most succulent food obtainable in those days was the browse of the nearest elm after it was cut down."

"Two pigs were procured during the summer, being enclosed, of course, in a log pen. On many occasions it was hard to tell whose claim came first—the bear's or the settler's."

"As money was still scarce, economy must be practiced. It was no uncommon thing to see children going to Sunday School barefooted. Others, to save their shoes, would carry them until near the meeting-house, and then put them on returning home, the same thing would be repeated."

Thomas Adams, of Howlett, writes describing the journey into the wilderness with his parents: "They were taken from Fort Erie to Black Rock by what was called a horse-boat. It was an open boat. There was a horse on it, hitched to a post. He stood on a large, flat wheel. When he began to move, the wheel moved around under him. That was the power that propelled the boat across to Black Rock."

Here is a memory of the Rebellion of '37:

"We had a neighbor by the name of Carey, who was a captain of the militia. He was stopping with a company of men at a hotel on the Longwoods road, near where the Village of Thamesville now is. A small band of rebels came there a little after dark and called the landlord out. They wanted to hire him to take them to Chatham. He went in and told Capt. Carey, who was outside. The Captain went out alone. The leader was getting a drink at the pump, and the Captain went up and arrested him. He had a pistol, and shot Captain Carey; then they all ran. Carey's men came out, but the rebels could not be seen in the dark. The Captain died the next morning."

"Deer were very plentiful, and used to run among the cows. Mr. Fancher had an old horse, which he used to put a cow-bell on and ride in the woods after the cows. He always took his rifle with him, and put an old harness on the horse and took a whiffletree and chain. The deer being used to the bell, he could get up quite close, and he would shoot them from where he sat on the horse. I have seen him come home with three deer dragging behind the horse. Once he trapped two wolves—a male and a female. He killed the male wolf, but the female he took home and put her in a hollow buttonwood log. Some of these logs had a hollow as large as seven feet in diameter. He took one of these logs, about nine feet long, and set it on end over the wolf, and had a ladder on the outside that he went up to let her feed down from the top. He kept her there till she had seven young ones. Then he killed them all, and got the bounty of \$7 a head on the lot, making \$63."

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Alice Gregory recounts this incident in the life of Roger Hartford, a pioneer of York County. He had tried his fortune in New York before coming to Canada:

"He learned that the British Government gave one hundred acres of land to every British subject producing a certificate which stated that they had left England for no crime? This news again revived their hopes, and they decided to proceed at once to Upper Canada. A few days later they were on their journey. It was a long tramp of 500 miles over bad roads and rough country. Roger footed it all the way, while his wife and children took turns, sometimes walking and sometimes riding in the wagon which conveyed their goods. At the end of three weeks they arrived at Sackett's Harbor, seeing, on the way, the great falls of Niagara, crossed Lake Ontario, and landed at York, Upper Canada, now the City of Toronto. At once he applied to His Excellency the Governor for a grant of land, and obtained one hundred acres of land twenty-five miles from York."

It is pleasant to record that this man "lived all his life on the farm he broke up and cultivated, and died at the age of ninety years, having accumulated a fortune of over \$80,000."

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In the sketch of Mrs. John McKay, written by Mrs. M. McNeillage, of Darrel, something is shown of the old-time minister and school teacher.

"Her earliest recollection of a marriage was the wedding of a couple (now deceased). The missionary minister, coming from London on horse-back, on this occasion, lost his way in the woods. A couple of young men, guests at the wedding, were sent to find him, and when he found he was on the right path, he whipped up his horse, and, by the time the boys arrived, the ceremony was over."

"The first schoolhouse was, of course, a log one, built in the year 1844. It had a door and one window, and fireplace for heating it, with logs split for seats, school term first three months, and then six months, in the year. The

teacher, a graduate from a university in Scotland, received the salary of \$50 per annum."

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The sketch of the experiences of Mrs. Thomas Humble, as told by Lizzie Humble Darling, of Brinsley, Ont., is full of interesting details of pioneer life and conveniences. To begin with, here is a sketch of "Granny": "The little, bent form in her shoulder shawl, black ruffled cap, a few stray gray locks peeping under the ruffle, and she enjoying her pipe."

"The one-legged bed seems to be quite a novelty. Two poles, about four inches in diameter, the length and width of the bed, flattened on one side, were put into holes in the logs from the corner and into the one leg. Another pole was pinned to the logs at the back, so that poles could be laid across and over these. Cedar and hemlock branches formed the tick until they had grown wheat to get straw. Homespun blankets covered the bed, and it was very comfortable, after all."

"A table on the same principle was made in another corner; benches, with basswood bark for seats, made excellent chairs. Wooden pins were driven into the logs at a medium height, and flattened poles laid on for a shelf. As many shelves as were needed could be made, and these made a very good cupboard. Underneath was a large box for eatables."

"Yeast was fermented from bran. About two quarts of boiling water was poured over one quart of bran and let stand a couple of days; then it was strained. This was used until hops came on the scene."

In closing her sketch, the writer touches on what was perhaps the greatest hardship endured by the pioneers:

"Can we imagine the loneliness, weariness and homesickness that prevailed in the hearts of these pioneers, so far from home and loved ones, starting a new home in a new country?"

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James Dingwall, of Williamstown, Ont., writes: "The hay was cut with scythes, and shaken out with wooden hand-forks. As far back as I can remember, we would gather up the hay with wooden hand-forks and hand-rakes, and coil it, and then stack it. The old barns were small, and were kept to store away the grain, which was cut with sickles and bound into sheaves. The threshing was done with a flail. I shall never forget, when I was going to school, how I used to have to thresh with the flail morning and evening, and do chores. A great deal of the threshing was done by French-Canadians who came from Lower Canada with their flails to thresh our grain and fan it with a hand fan for the tenth bushel. They came in the fore part of the winter, and, when through threshing, would go home. Then they came with their trances (sleighs) loaded with salt and fish, which they disposed of. Then they would take home the toll of the grain they had threshed."

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Thomas Davidson, of Wingham, gives an idea of what the old-time hogs that ran wild in the woods were like:

"A neighbor went to get a pig. He had two bulldogs and a gun. There were twenty-eight in the herd. They formed a circle, with heads out, mouths open, and a mane of bristles up the middle of their backs. They defied the dogs. He shot one, and when the drove had dispersed, he got it."

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Robert McLaren Miller, of Mt. St. Louis, gives an excellent account of the preparation of pioneer lumber:

"The first lumber that was cut in the Township of Medonte was done in the saw-pit. It was a long, narrow pit, dug in the ground to the depth of a man standing in it. There were two small pieces of timber put across the pit. When a pine log was hewed to a square, it was placed over the pit and chalk-lined on the upper and the lower sides to the thickness of the board they wanted. With one man standing on the log, and the other down in the pit, they kept the log saw going up and down, following the marked lines, the cutting being done with a downward stroke."