Pioneer Life in Kansas

Mary Josephine Comstock
June 1st, 1896
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For the flourishing condition of our beloved state of Kansas we are greatly indebted to its earliest settlers, the pioneers. "Ad Astra Per Aspera," "To the stars through difficulties," has always been the motto of the people of Kansas, and they have succeeded in converting a broad expanse of uninhabited prairie into a thriving and prosperous state, whose citizens are free, thrifty, loving people, instead of hard hearted slave owners, as they might have been. The Algonquins, the American Indians, who resided on the prairies of the state, were not inclined to agricultural pursuits, though they raised such products as corn, beans, and pumpkins.

The first white men to settle in Kansas were, Daniel Brown, who was sent to the mouth of the Grasshopper creek, where he began farming in 1829, and Rev. Thomas Johnson, who founded the Shawnee Mission in Johnson County in 1830. The earliest settlers were farmers, who were attracted by the richness of the soil, though sooner all classes of people might be found here.
callings were represented. Some, on account of losses, came to retain their lost fortunes and make a new start in life, some attracted by the mild climate to regain lost health, and here, many young men found an open field for their callings or professions. Later the settlers flocked here for political reasons. All came for a good cause, to build up a home, and so doing, they built up the state.

Here upon the broad prairies, all conventional allusions were entirely lost, and in place of it there was a freedom, a liberal feeling among the people. Each had the peculiarities of his former state, for Kansas was too broad to admit of it being retained. In that stage of Kansas history, no one would stop to ask the ancestry of a person; what they would want to know was the extent of his ability and courage.

Kansas was a thoroughly attractive state even in its desolate condition, then for miles not a fence was to be seen nor a habitation. A traveler after passing through the state at that time, says he could find no words with which to
express the beauty of the Kaukaun Prairie. It was such a broad expanse, covered with grass, mostly rich and thick. Many mounds, which were objects of wonder and admiration, were to be seen. They seem to have been artificial constructions for defense, worship, or astronomical observatories.

The settlers who came for the purpose of carrying on agricultural pursuits found a dark rich soil, varying somewhat in different localities. It was either slightly sandy, clayey, or a good vegetable mould. The splendid water supply also afforded great advantage. Buffaloes, Antelopes, elk, Prairie Chickens, and quails furnished part of the animal food of the settlers; in fact the pioneer were fortunate in having a variety of good food. Apples, peaches, cherries, plums, grapes, berries, and all kinds of fruits as well as vegetables and cereals were readily produced.

The dwellings were mostly rude affairs, being made of logs. Some of the settlers were fortunate enough to have plasters between these logs, but those who were not
had cool summer houses, and when the cold
north winds of winter cause they posted
papers over the openings. These answered
the purpose very nicely until a heavy
made them damp, so that they flaked
off, then they must be re-posted and so on
according to the number of rains. These
cabin were usually about fifteen feet square
and eleven feet high. The windows were of
cotton cloth, the doors made of a frame,
with a cross piece, covered with cloth. In
building these cabin joints were driven
into the ground and the oak shaker,
which was logy rudely heavy, were nailed
to the outside. Frequently the roof was
eiled with cotton cloth nailed across
the rafters, while the floor were
sometimes remarkable on account of
their absence. Such were the homes of
many noble men and women, in their
foundings of the state.

The population of Kansas did not
increase in a remarkable degree, until
it was made a territory in 1850.

There were no towns of any size at this
time, and no place for the legislators
to meet; the first legislature however met
in a large stone house a short distance
from Fort Riley, the second, at the
Chownee Mission. By 1854 Leavenworth,
Atchison, Lawrence and Topeka, had been
founded and people were flocking into
the state.

About this time the Kansas-Nebraska bill
which declared that the inhabitants of
the state should decide, whether or not,
slavery should be allowed within its
limits, was passed. It was generally
understood that the United States
Government was going to make a
treaty with the Chownee Indians,
whose reservation was just across the
Missouri line, in order to obtain this
land for pre-emption by the settlers.
The pro-slavery people were determined
that Kansas should be a slave state, so, in
they flocked across the Missouri line
and staked out their 160 acres of land
upon this reservation. These Shawnee,
illegal as the time was held till the
luck, and defense was made by the use
of arms when necessary.
The law of pre-emption provides that the head of a family may settle on a tract of land not exceeding 160 acres, for which $2.50 per acre must be paid at the end of twelve months. When the claim was taken, a foundation, which usually consisted of four 2polls forming a square, was laid. On a few claims a 2pole was plod straight up and half a dozen 2hingles were nailed to the top. While the pro-slavery people were rushing in, to make Kansas a slave state the abolitionists were also congregating about the border. Kansas, being such a central state, this contest for and against slavery, largely determined the fate of the Union. It was thought, that if Kansas could be free, then perhaps slavery would gradually fade away from Missouri. The pro-slavery people brought slaves only as domestics, and not as field hands. These planters settled in communities, claiming the surrounding region, informing all people not of the right kind, that this land was taken up, so the abolitionists were kept out of the state as often as
possible. Such settlements organized, and faced resolutions, which were sent out to the public as the petition of Kansas. But many brave men from the north, faced all opposition, though it was very bitter, and came to help free, Kansas. The New England Emigrant Aid Company came to the rescue and sent out many abolitionists. They offered cheap transportation, and induced eastern people to come, by themselves investing money in Kansas, thus giving them a pioneer spirit.

At this, the few brave people grew anxious and held many meetings, some of which were violent and disgraceful. From this time, throughout the struggle they advocated: first, stopping northerners emigrants from coming in; second, getting rid of all Northerners that were then within the Kansas boundaries.

The Northern people were commanded to lean, with the threat, that if they did not they would be wiped out of existence. It seemed that Kansas was to become the battlefield, where all
the dispute of the Nation were to be settled. The Missourians seemed to take pride in burning farms, and killing the most honored citizens. This was not only carried out by the Missourians and their followers: they probably were the originators of such outrage, and were by far the most eminently their opponents, but the southern men did their best to return to them like treatment. The equal to the honor during the early history of Kansas has never been recorded.

After the threat was made by the pro-slavery class, many honest abolitionists were driven from their homes, and their families left destitute. It was not safe to refuse a compliance to commands in those days. The chances were that an individual would be frightfully misrepresented or killed if he did. Rev. Butler, a northern minister, was asked to sign a set of resolutions of the southern men. On his refusal, he was set out on the river on a raft, bearing such inscriptions as these: 'The why they are
stand in Kansas; for "Boston" and "Cape" incurred — unavoidable danger of the Missourians and Missourians! This excepted. If any attempt was made to sympathize with the negroes was made, suffering was the consequence.

John Boy and his son tried to free thirteen negroes who had fled from Missouri. Their object was to convey the captives to Canada, but also, they were caught and thrown into prison for five years. Then they remained but a short time as a mob of their friends accosted the jailer and compelled him to release them.

The most bloody scene during the whole contest, was the massacre at Lawrence. Overhill with a band of followers, marched on the city, came up main street just before day broke, and succeeded in making a wholesale slaughter before they left. They were like mad men, yelling and roaring, and frightening the people with their demons like noises. They burned the city and shot people in all directions.
Duck cold-blooded murder was
surely never before nor since committed.
The robbers would take a drink of
water from a cistern with one hand,
and shoot him with the other. I have
heard an old minister, who in the
eyear twenty lived in Lawrence, tell
of his escape with a cornfield just out
of town. As he was climbing the fence
a southerner fired at him, but missed
the mark. Being quick witted, he tumbled
over the fence and lay like dead. One
of the company quietly remarked, "There
went a d—— Northerner" and the man
on. When all were out of sight he
fled to his hiding place. A great many
people were passed in the cornfields and
remained just outside the city. One of
the robbers asked a woman what was
out in the cornfield. Her reply was, "Be
and see, but it is the hottest place I
have been in today." He took her warn-
ing and did not go for which she
rejoiced, so many in that field had
defended upon her for water that day.
Many were the hundreded that were
clain on Kansas soil between 1854 and the close of the war. Much more
the boom blew on the pioneers. Many
were the fields of corn that were lost
for, instead of gathering corn, the
citizens were guarding their homes
and their settlement. Much money
and many meals were given to the
soldiers. The women sat in their houses
in dread of an approaching, for they
knew not which he would prove,
friend or an enemy. The sound
of fire arms was continually heard
in the eastern part of the state. The
caliber was often fired at bullets
easily forcing between the logs or
even penetrating them, making it much
dangerous to sleep near the floor. Rifles
and ammunition were ornaments
in every home in early Kansas.

The years were long and lonely ones
till the close of the war. The settlers
lived so far apart, and there was much
danger in traveling any distance
that the ones at home must remain
there. Many of them had come
from the east, and heard, only once in a great while from the friends at home, for the mail system was not at that time very good — all mail was carried overland from Kansas City.

Besides the political difficulties, the winter of '85-'86 was exceedingly cold. Snow fell from the twenty-second of December till the third of January, and the snow was frozen one to two feet deep. This extreme cold caused much suffering as did the drought the year before. The settlers were becoming accustomed to hardships, but yet when the grasshoppers came, they were made almost destitute, for all crops were a failure and the troubles had lasted so long, that there was nothing laid by for a rainy day.

That Kansas people were intelligent is shown by the fact that public schools and churches were built soon after the place became a territory. Newspapers, "The Kansas Weekly Herald", said...
"The Kansas Pioneer" was printed as early as '54.

That the state might have been, if less intelligent, less patriotic, and less energetic people had inhabited it, we can pretty well tell. The twice of 'Ur Argéa" was long and bitter, but soon after followed the glorious "Ad Argéa." May the motto dear to the heart of every Kansas youth be "Ad Argéa Tes Argéa," and may we never forget what we owe to the pioneers, and do our utmost to make Kansas the Most, noblest state in the Union.

Mary Josephine Pincus
June 1st, 1876