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April 6, 2011

THIS WEEK: The early Iowa experience for women

BACKGROUND: From *The Story of Iowa: The Progress of an American State*, by William J. Petersen, Vol. 1, Copyright 1952, Lewis Historical Publishing Co., Inc., New York

The early Iowa experience for women

The homes of the early pioneers were usually made of timber along the eastern edge of the state where trees were plentiful along the rivers and streams. In the western areas of Iowa, wood was scarce and homes were made of sod.

In those early days on the prairie, in sod huts, stoves were used for cooking and heating. Wood and coal were rarely found, so twisted hay and cobs were used as fuel. Utensils and materials used for cooking were few and often times crude. In cabins bread was baked in a "Dutch Oven" sitting close to the fire and then covered with the coals. There were no cellars, so sometimes pioneers would dig holes in the floor and bury their vegetables. Fruits and berries could be dried. Meats were salted or smoked. If the pioneers were lucky enough to live near a hill, they could dig a root cellar and the vegetables would be good until spring. In the spring, the dandelion leaves were plentiful and welcomed. The prairie housewives found it very difficult to keep the "house" clean. Dirt floors or puncheon floors would have required little maintenance but only added to the problem. One-room cabins or sod huts served as bedroom, living room, kitchen, laundry, and a hospital

if necessary. Rats and mice were everywhere, and lice, flies, mosquitoes, and bedbugs were common and expected. A full stomach was the most important thing; a balanced diet was unheard of as were antibiotics and well-trained doctors. A common remedy— especially among men— was whiskey.



Sod pioneer house

Divorces were granted in certain circumstances but were frowned upon, and until 1846 divorces often times required legislative action. A wife was expected to obey and overlook her husband's shortcomings.

There was recreation for women. The girls and women could meet for quilting bees and apple paring bees. There were husking parties, which offered entertainment for both men and women. They were usually held in a barn, with two large piles of corn and two teams of equal numbers, and the winners had to husk through their pile first.

The most prominent holiday was the Fourth of July, and large community picnics lasted all day. There were games and plenty of food. Thanksgiving Day was also a reason for a celebration. The feast likely was indoors and perhaps consisted of wild turkey, corn pone, assorted nuts, and pumpkin pie. Christmas would have been the third great holiday. The gifts were small, but the food was abundant. The women would have welcomed the few minutes of rest between the preparation and time to clean up.

Pioneer life was hard work and sometimes lonely. Iowa in the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s was no exception.



Benjamin Littler Cabin, Mahaska County, Iowa (mid-19th century)
Mahaska Historical Society Archives