

REFLECTIONS ON PIONEER LIFE – LETTER FROM THE PEN OF A PIONEER MOTHER

The history of pioneer life generally presents only the dark side of the picture. The toils and privations of the early settlers were not a series of unmitigated sufferings. The addition of each new acre to their “clearings” brought with it fresh enjoyment, and cheered them on in the pursuit of their ultimate object, an unincumbered and a happy home. They were happy also in their fraternal feelings; or, as one expressed it, “the feeling of brotherhood – the disposition to help one another;” or, in the language of another, “society was uncultivated; yet the people were very friendly to each other, quite as much so as relatives at the present day.”

We could now hardly endure the thought of exchanging our comfortable and elegant carriages for the rude ones of our fathers and grandfathers, which served the various purposes of visiting, and of going to mill and to meeting; yet who doubts that families had a “good time” when they made a visit to a “neighbor” at a distance of several miles, through the woods, on an ox sled? Our mothers were clad in homespun of their own make; and not a few remember the *glad surprise*, when fathers, on their return from market, presented their faithful helpmeets with a six yards calico dress pattern for Sunday wear. And it is presumed that the wearer was in quite as devotional frame of mind, and enjoyed Sabbath exercises quite as well as she who now flaunts her gorgeously trimmed silk of fifteen or twenty yards, made up into a style transforming the wearer into the “likeness” of something never before seen or known “above,” or “on the earth beneath,” and altered with every change of the moon.

People were happy in their families. The boys, having labored hard during the day, sought rest at an early hour. Parents had the pleasure of seeing their sons acquiring habits of industry and frugality – a sure prognostic of success in life. The “higher civilization” had not yet introduced –

“In every country village, where
Ten chimney smokes perfumed the air.”

those popular modern institutions, the saloon and the billiard room, in which so many youth now receive the principal training. Fewer parents spent sleepless nights in anxious thought about their “prodigal sons.” Or had their slumbers broken by the noisy entrance of these sons on returning from their midnight revels. They saw no clouds rising to dim the prospect of a happy future to their children. Never were wives and mothers more cheerful than when, like the virtuous woman described by Solomon, “they laid their hands to the spindle, and their hands held the distaff;” or when, with their knitting work or sewing, and baby, too, they went – unbidden, as the custom was – to spend an afternoon with the “neighbor women,” by whom they were received with a hearty, unceremonious welcome. The “latch-string was out” at all times; and even the formality of knocking was, by the more intimate neighbors, not observed.

Nor did they lack topics of conversation at these visits. Prominent among them were their domestic affairs – their manifold industrial enterprises and labors – and the anticipated reward of their privations and toils. Their conversation some may suppose, evinced no high degree of intellectual culture; yet, as an indication of the such culture, surely it would not suffer in comparison with the gossip of many of our modern ladies at their social gatherings.

The following extract from the pen of a pioneer mother in another county, may be read with interest by some:

“The country around us was an entire wilderness, with here and there a small cabin, containing a small family. We were nearly all new beginners, and although we had to work almost day and night, we were not discouraged. There were many and serious trials in the beginning of this country, with those who settled amid the heavy timber, having nothing to depend upon for a living but their own industry. Such was our situation. However we were blessed with health and strength, and were able to accomplish all that was necessary to be done. Our husbands cleared the ground, and assisted each other in rolling the logs. We often went with them on these occasions, to assist in the way of cooking for the hands.

“We had first-rate times, just such as hard laboring men and women can appreciate. We were not what now would be called fashionable cooks; we had no pound cakes, preserves or jellies, but the substantial, prepared in plain, old-fashioned style. This is one reason why we were blessed with health; we had none of your dainties, knick-knacks, and *fixings* that are worse than nothing. There are many diseased that we had never even heard of forty to sixty years ago, such as dyspepsia, neuralgia, and many others too tedious to mention. It was not *fashionable* then to be weakly. We could take our spinning-wheels and walk two to four miles to a spinning frolic, do our day’s work, and after a first rate supper, join in some innocent

amusement for the evening. We did not take particular pains to keep our hands white; we knew they were made to use for our advantage; therefore, we never thought of having hands just to look at. Each settler had to go and assist his neighbors ten or fifteen days, in order to get help in return in log-rolling time; this was the only way to get assistance. I have thought proper to mention these matters, that people now may know what the early settlers had to undergo. We, however, did not complain half as much as people do now. Our diet was plain; our clothing we manufactured ourselves. We lived independent, and were all on an equality. How the scene has changed! Children of these same pioneers know nothing of hardship; they are spoiled by indulgence, and are generally planning ways and means to live without work.”

It is, indeed, to many who have been brought up in the lap of ease, not a little surprising that a wife and mother should do the housework for a family in which were six, eight or more children, and occasionally some hired men, without extra help. Yet such instances were common.

But advancement in society is an American trait. Had we pursued the course of the greater number of the nations of the earth, we should have been, at this day, treading in the footsteps of our forefathers, from whose example in many respects we should have thought it criminal to depart.

The horse paths by which the early settlers made their laborious journeys over the mountains for salt, iron and other necessities, were succeeded by wagon roads, and those again by turnpikes, which brought the distant region, once denominated as the backwoods, into close and lucrative connection with the great Atlantic cities. Then followed, in quick succession, as if by magic enchantment, canals, railroads and telegraphs. The duration of time for making the once perilous journey over the mountains, was successively reduced from weeks to days, and from days to hours.

The ruder sports of former times – the trials of muscular strength and activity – gave way to the more noble ambition for mental endowments, to the spread of education, and skill the useful arts.

In the stead of the rude song, roughly and unskillfully sung, succeeded the psalm, the hymn, the quartette glee, and the swelling anthem.

The linsey and coarse linen of the early settlers were in time exchanged for the substantial and fine fabrics of Europe and Asia, and soon superinduced the spirit of American genius for manufacture, which we now see fairly rivaling the world’s industries.

The hunting shirt gave place to a suit of broadcloth, and the feet that once trod in moccasins were enclosed in boots and shoes of tanned leather.

Our development in the useful arts, finally brought forth our great manufactories of iron and steel, crockery and glassware, implements and machinery, and the rude utensils of the pioneers are supplanted with articles of the most improved utility and beauty, fabricated at our very doors.

Instead of blind imitation of the manners and customs of their forefathers, the people *thought* and acted for themselves; they changed themselves and everything around them. The changes gave new currents to public feeling and individual pursuit, causing the improvements in the dress of the people and the furniture of their houses. Had the hunting shirt, moccasin and leggings continued to be the dress of men – had the three-legged stool, the noggin, the trencher and wooden bowl remained as the furniture of their houses, progress towards science and civilization would have been much slower.