



James C. Christie and Family Papers

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A SKETCH (HISTORICAL)

Francis W. Stevens

It's a far call from Indians and big gray wolves and buffalo trails to paved roads and Fords and short skirts, but we have arrived, and still the genius of progress beckons from far beyond, while we struggle on in vain pursuit, whimpering like "Poor Joe," "Wisher may die if I aint a-movin' on."

Father moved by covered wagon from eastern Wisconsin to the old farm near Good Thunder, Minnesota, in the fall of 1864. I remember the trip only in spots: the blazing camp-fires at night; the call of night birds from the darkened forest; the crossing of "The Divide," its summit silent and dusky in the deep shade of great oaks, their rough trunks carved thick with the names of those urged on by that mysterious call of the West that down through the ages has stirred man to pursue the red camp-fires of the setting sun; the wide, tawny landscape beyond the Mississippi River; the night wind crooning through the long grass under the wagon where I slept; the white bones of elk and buffalo; the autumn sky streaming with the long, dark lines of geese and ducks; of passenger pigeons on their matchless wings; of brant and crows and sand-hill cranes; and all the hosts that fly.

No rains fell and the roads were firm, for the season was the third summer of drought. The prairies were being swept by fires that burned deep into the peat of the old slough beds, that for years after were blue ponds where muskrats built their houses, and wild ducks nested. I can dimly remember that as we were passing through the Maple River woods, Father said,

"We're almost home now!"

And soon after, as we were all walking with Mother and gathering

flowers, we came to a wide, sandy river bed with a trickle of water through it, and holding to my mother's hand, I stepped with one stretch of my short, four-year-old legs over Maple River. All the water in it, I have heard my father say, would have run through an inch auger hole. That was September 3rd, 1864.

We lived for several days in the covered wagons, till Father and the hired men had built a log cabin about twelve by sixteen feet, in which we passed the winter. The room was small -- almost as small as I have heard an Arkansaw hill-man describe their mountain cabins -- "So damned small ye couldn't cuss a cat in one of them 'thout gittin' ha'r in yore teeth." But it was warm and comfortable, and next spring a large and permanent one was built.

Quaint people, driven by night or storm, stopped at that little cabin -- people who knew luxuries only as names, and to whom even comforts were not usual. There were men among them who had looked at Indians through the sights of their rifles, and women whose faces grew strangely old as they told of the horrors they had seen. Sometimes whole families piled in upon us, but somehow, somewhere, all had food and beds, for elemental necessity always finds "room for one more." On such occasions, storms and Indians, bad roads and sickness were the subjects of talk the first part of the evening, for life and song were in a minor key in those days, and we youngsters listened through the dim yellow candle light in shivery ecstasies of terror. But frontier people, so like nature in her abrupt changes, pass swiftly from one mood into another, and the talk broke down at last of its own weight of gloom, and jokes followed complainings. Someone told of "Bill," who in the hurry and excitement of loading his shotgun, mistook poppy seed for gunpowder, and crawled two hundred yards through sloppy snow to shoot some wild geese, and wondered why in hell the gun didn't go off. Then someone told of Mrs. --- in his neighborhood,

who slipped on her wet, soapy floor, fell into a tub of water, and came out spluttering, "I don't need to be thrown by no soapy floor, into a washtub, to take a bath!"

And another told of J---, who was slightly deaf (sometimes very much so). He was complaining of his poverty one day, and a neighbor said,

"Why, I'll give you a pig, J---, if you'll come and get it."

He came the next day for the pig, and at once jumped into the pen and picked up the biggest one. His friend shouted,

"No! NO! Not that one! I want to keep that one!"

J--- smilingly shouted back, "Let him squeal! I can hold him!"

The joke was too good, and J--- got his pig.

"Early to bed" was the rule for youngsters, and we finally undressed in the dim candle light, and shirt-tailed it into bed, where we slept at both head and foot, and dreamed of all the horrors of the evening's talk. Later, when the older ones retired, the lights were blown out, and darkness made chamber walls for all.

Everybody and everything was busy through the long winter -- men and blizzards and piling snows and Fate. Spring came with the honk of wild geese leading the return of the hosts of wings. There is something profoundly stirring in that deep call of wild geese moving so majestically free, high above all that troubles us down here in our sweat and dust and debts -- something that rips up the foundations of humdrum life, and lifts us up into the high, clean places.

Rain and green grass and flurries of snow followed; and one of those flurries of snow, the night before the Jewett family was murdered by the Indians, saved my father's life.

Father had bought a yoke of oxen from Jewett shortly before, and they

were still in the habit of returning to their old home across the narrow prairie when turned out to graze. Not intending to work them the next day, Father had turned them loose, but changed his plans the next morning, and started out to find them. Through the light fall of snow he could follow their tracks, lining straight back to Jewett's, and to certain death for him, until he came to the State Road, running down the middle of the prairie. Here, in that mysterious dispensation of accidents, the oxen turned from their course and followed the road to the present site of Good Thunder, where Father found them grazing. As he was returning home he heard the guns of the Indians beginning the murder of the Jewett family. Had there been no snow, he would have gone directly to Jewett's for the straying oxen, and been murdered with them.

Shortly after Father's return with the oxen, soldiers rode up and told us of the murder. In the exaggerated fears of the people, the woods were full of Indians returned to repeat the horrors of two years before. Every owl that hooted, every wolf that howled, was an Indian. Father moved the family to Garden City until it was believed safe to return home. The porch of the house we occupied was boarded up with heavy planks, partly bullet-proof, with port-holes to shoot through. The men rode around to their homes each day in small parties, and milked the cows and did the chores. We remained some two weeks before returning to our home.

One evening shortly after our return, we had been absent for the day, and on returning, found a notice on the door, telling us that Indians had been seen nearby, and that the settlers were to meet at Riley Stratton's, about four or five miles north. I can still see that small square of white paper gleaming through the dusk of evening on the door, and Father's anxious face as he sprang from the wagon and hurried to read it, knowing it meant Indians.

We hastily drank some milk, ate some bread and butter, watered the oxen

and started for Stratton's. No one knew how many Indians might be lurking in the woods. Father and Mother sat on the seat -- Father with a long-barreled musket between his knees, loaded with thirteen buckshot, while we children huddled down on the hay in the bottom of the box, our heads close together, too terrified to speak above a whisper. The night was starry and dead still; not a breath stirred the heavy spring air -- it seemed like the hush before some dreadful calamity. Some little gray birds chirped from the grass, and I felt, in contrast with them, the frightful insecurity of our lives, and wished that we, too, might be birds until the danger was past. The jolting of the wagon over the rough sod echoed from forest to forest across the narrow prairie -- the Indians could have heard us for miles. But there was no choice. We must go to the place of meeting, and Father drove on, peering ahead through the dim starlight, Mother beside him, holding in her lap the power-horn and pouch of buckshot, not knowing what the night was holding for us one minute beyond.

All was dark and silent when we arrived at Stratton's. Father called and rapped on the door, but there was no one there. Some people had gotten so badly scared, they had forgotten their obligations. We turned around and drove back through the deep quiet of the night, keeping to the middle of the prairie till we came to Drake's house, near the present site of Good Thunder, a house far out from the timber. It was midnight when we got there. Through the boarded windows streamed thin slits of candle light, and we could hear a low murmur of voices, but no one answered Father's call. Finally he stood close to the door, told who he was, and where we had been driving. Someone inside said,

"That's his voice! It's no Injuns!"

We could hear the moving of heavy weights, the door was soon opened

and we walked in. Pitchforks and axes stood in the corners, guns leaned against the walls, and heavy knives were stuck in the logs. There was only one room -- about fourteen by eighteen feet. It was full of people. Children lay asleep on the floor in huddled lumps. Fear had kept me awake, and I have a vivid memory of a man walking across the room and taking down a steel-pointed arrow from the wall, and handing it to Mother as he said, "That is the arrow that killed Mrs. Jewett!" My mother's face reflected all the pain and tragedy of the gruesome thing as she held it in her hands for a brief while, picturing the possibility of herself and family dying by others like it.

We had numerous Indian scares after that, when all gathered at some neighbor's house. But with the coming of winter, all fear of Indians passed away -- they made no raids at that season. With the passing of the Indian, the real frontier and the pioneer passed away from Blue Earth County forever.

The pioneer was a peculiar character. He was something of a gambler, something of a fatalist -- and very much a dreamer. The soft west wind from its realms of mystery and romance whispered of fairer landscapes; the low-setting sun drew him with resistless call to his radiant camp-fire, and opened a portal for his dreams into the West, the clouds floating gorgeous and red above it.

Almost a law unto himself, his restless spirit demanded freedom from the restraints of all law but the laws of Nature. Those he never questioned. Unresting as nature, change was essential to his life as change is to the life of water. Danger educated him; and Nature in her manifold bounties taught him generosity, for around him were her streams, her forests, and her rich, flowered prairies, that lived only to give. Living far beyond the taint and maladies that stain men's souls, he stood alone amid the wide, clean places, where winds and sun and elemental forces reign, and where God is

not interpreted in creeds. Alone, surrounded by the tremendous forces of nature, where Accident walked ever close at his side, quick to touch him with the finger of death at the first unguarded moment, he smiled upon danger as the zest of life to him; and, invoking the traditions of his calling, passed unharmed through the perils that beset him by day and by night. Seeking peace and content in a life of change and unrest, with superb faith in the promises of his longing, he followed the lure of a fleeting hope -- a hope ever retreating as the horizon before him. Something of the august soul of the wilderness was expressed in the calm composure of his features, and in his eyes was the far distance of hill and plain and forest avenue, that so often for him held the riddle of life and death. About him there clung that ever-strange atmosphere, that character of individuality, of oneness and infinite freedom that is the heritage of those who dare.

A year from that spring, a little log schoolhouse was built on my father's land. It was a scant fourteen by sixteen feet, and stood among tall basswoods and spreading oaks, where the ragged fringe of the forest, meeting the prairie, mingled with poplar groves and hazel thickets a few rods back from the crest of the high bluff looking down into the tree-filled valley below.

No schoolroom could be more bare. Its flooring was broad, rough boards; its low walls supported a ceiling little above a tall man's head. Nailed to the logs on the north side was a wide, basswood board that served as desk for books and writing, and an oak plank with stout legs was its seat. This was the girls' side -- facing the north and lighted by two window sashes placed horizontally in the wall. A similar desk with seat and window facing the south was provided for the boys; and thus we began our education by turning our backs on the girls -- it didn't last long. A rough three by four foot

blackboard hung on the wall, with its lump of chalk beside the door, and a water-pail and small box stove completed the appointments of the room.

There was no bell. In its stead, the teacher shouted, "School's called," or pounded on the clapboards of the low gable with the long, wooden poker. The work of the builders was done, and they went back to their plows and fences, leaving nature as undisturbed around the little schoolhouse nested there as did the partridge breeding among the ferns, or the woodchuck, peering from his mossy log. Orioles and scarlet tanagers hung their nests from the tops of the lofty basswoods overhanging the room; partridges drummed on mossy logs; wild pigeons crowded the branches of the old oaks in fluttering masses of hazel-buff and slaty blue; the songs of birds and the fragrance of many flowers drifted through the room; chipmunks stole up the embankments to the low window-sills, and sneaked cookies and biscuits from open dinner baskets. And one day a deer brought her dappled fawns within a hundred feet of the south window and grazed there for several minutes, while a deep silence fell upon that school, and the civilizations of ages deserted us as we crouched, tense and eager stalking panthers, watching.

Wild strawberries, raspberries, gooseberries and wilder belly-aches prevailed throughout the summer. And in the fall -- wild plums, grapes, nuts, crab-apples -- and yet more little bellies wildly aching "ALL THROUGH THE NIGHT!"

There was a girls' side and a boys' side for school days in that room, and a women's side and a men's side for Sunday school and church. The farmer brought his wife, and the young fellow his girl; but they were divided at the door, even as the sheep are led out on one hand, and the goats upon the other. Mary's little lamb might follow here with all the yearning constancy of that frontier schoolroom, and no son of Adam presumed to follow her through that

invisible and impenetrable wall of ancient custom that separated them in school and church.

Those were the days when dragon-flies sewed up the eyes of sleeping ones; when horse hairs turned into snakes; when meteors were falling stars; when glass-snakes, broken into many pieces, rejoined themselves and went on their way in glad pursuit of life and happiness; and when preachers, those earnest old doctors of the soul, applied the blister of hell-fire as a counter-irritant to sin.

Not a boy in that neighborhood, until he was eighteen or more years old, wore underclothing or had a nightshirt or an overcoat or overshoes. His sole dress in winter was a cap with a woolen muffler, a coat, a shirt, a vest, and pants of cotton, and high-topped boots with woolen socks -- I can still feel the snow blowing up around my boot-tops, and spraying my bare legs when my pants were not tucked in. In summer time -- a shirt, pants and straw hat -- no boots or shoes till frosty fall. In twenty seconds, a boy could spring from bed, pull on his pants, tuck in his shirt, clap on his hat and be dressed for the day. Twenty-five cents was the limit of cash for his celebration of the glorious Fourth of July; and nickels between times looked as big and alluring as the full moon to a summer lover. A girl in her first teens would have worked a year for a silk dress, a mad-flowered hat and a pair of big-buckled slippers; and a small boy would have traded his soul everlasting for one day of unlimited pop and candy and circus.

Those were care-free times for germs. School youngsters (no "kids" in those days) exchanged slates and licked them clean of pencil marks; a cud of gum passed through the whole school, and all drank from the big dipper, pouring back what each one didn't drink -- making a fine pool of happy little demons. But those were the days of hoop-skirts, of babies sent from ethereal realms, and blushes wasted on the desert air -- the days when men's legs were

"lower limbs," and women didn't have any; and people looked in almanacs for weather forecasts.

The schoolhouse was the social center for a wide community. Meetings of all kinds were held there -- Sunday school, spelling contests, political meetings, church. Through the long summer days, the people were thinking more of their wheat and cattle, than of their souls. Presiding elders preached their regular pot-boilers; and itinerants crept in like hungry church mice, between times, to pick up the few crumbs that might fall into passing hats -- the attitude toward church was luke warm. But when winter came with its long black nights, and the white silence of the fields over the buried flowers and grasses, they were reminded that life is brief, and turned to the little log schoolhouse as to a shrine for their souls' redemption. Protracted meetings were announced for "early candle light." Hell, real hell, "seven times hotter than it need to be," was preached, and we were warned that most pleasures led to it. "'Tis pity, though, in this sublime world, that pleasure's a sin, and sometimes sin's a pleasure." Penitent ones soon filled the mourners' bench. The attaining of their souls' salvation was "kind of" on the installment plan -- pay down in repentance as much as you can now, and in time you possess your souls in full. They renounced the blandishments of the dance, the privilege of little white lies, the doubtful pleasures of gossip, and the flare of temper. They struggled hard to be good, their faces beaming with a new light. But title to the human soul has been in litigation ever since that unhappy fall of Beelzebub, and the devil still has a pretty large equity in it. In many, the fires of enthusiasm soon began to cool. Temptation hourly beset them, and payments fell due thicker and faster -- the growth of the soul was all too slow and hopeless for frail, hurried humanity. Dances grew irresistible, shady gossip was a rich morsel, and cuss words became luxuries. Penitents failed to meet their obligations, surrendered

their equities to the devil, and walked once more in the paths of the ungodly. But the next series of protracted meetings found them again and again repentant, only to fall as before, till time and ampler experience, perhaps, taught them that straying souls like theirs are pretty much like the Bo Peep lambs:

"Leave them alone and they'll come home,
A-waggin' their tails behind them."

The effect of all this talk of hell and Heaven and everlasting life was somewhat startling to us small ones. We were told that somewhere among the stars we would live another life -- a life without end and without change. I tried to understand that, and was appalled at the solemn vastness of it, and marvelled dimly at an equation of time that could set a few brief years of the soul in this life against the immensity of eternity in the next -- there seemed a lack of balance somewhere. In a wide flood of imagination, I sought to follow that life to some end, some change, some resting place, in the tremendous immensity of its flight, but ended by fearing both heaven and hell with their unchanging eternity -- it's still astray with the Bo Peep lambs.

The fear of the end of the world by fire, "any day! any hour!" kept some of us youngsters in terror for months after one of those protracted meetings. An old schoolmate told me years afterward that he used to wake up in the night in fright of the end of the world, and feel of his shirt and bed-clothes to see if they were on fire.

The early French explorers of the St. Peter, as they called the Minnesota River, exclaimed at the great wealth of natural foods here held forth ready for man's use, and declared the valley of the St. Peter to be the most favored of all they had discovered in America. Here were rivers and lakes teeming with fish, fur-bearing animals, and countless water-fowl; great fields of wild rice waving heavy with grain; trees yielding a sugar unsurpassed; trees and bushes loaded with nuts and fruits, or hung with grapes, along the

river banks; while elk and deer and buffalo thronged the forest and prairie. Many valuable medicinal plants grew here, and Indians used them in age-old remedies. On every hand was water; and the forest, deep-sunk below the prairie, gave fuel and snug shelter from the storms of winter, while an abundance of food and frost-cleaned air made this a matchless home of health and comfort for both man and animal. No wonder the Indian fought for a land that held in itself so many essentials of a perfect home for either redman or white.

The road to Mankato was fourteen miles long and four feet deep in the spring and rainy season. We ferried across the river at the old Red Jacket mill, and got home after dark. Today, here where once we had dragged so painfully slow through winter cold or sweltering summer heat, I passed at forty miles an hour, and no one was troubled about the "horses gettin' all het up." Here, where once the wild grass waved deep and the flames of prairie fires leaped twenty feet high -- here, where my frightened eyes had searched the night for crouching Indians, were only fields of grain. I left the car at the railroad crossing and walked up the track; and the influence of old things came upon me. For here, along the right-of-way, ran a thread of the ancient prairie, like the refrain of an old song telling of buffaloes and Indians, of big gray wolves, and wild fires racing with wilder winds.

Here had been life for untold ages, strong, deep, intense, with but a single purpose -- the joy of living. Bobolinks were singing on the tall, yellow sun-flowers, and little gray birds nested in the grasses among the phlox and red lilies. Here, where once were free acres, now all around me were cultivated fields crowding close upon the other, every tired and sweating acre now chained to the recorder's desk, a slave on the block to the highest bidder. All around me were anxiety and confusion. Only the little gray bird and the bobolink were living life without haste and without worry, down among the grasses.

And the grasses?

Those heirs of crumbling hills and immortality seemed saying,

"You wheat fields and you corn fields that stand so vauntingly above us! On some far-off day when civilization shall have tired of the vanities of strife, we will tangle the feet of your plowmen and resume our ancient empire!"

I could see that prairie on a summer day sixty-six years ago, a garden of wild flowers -- red lilies, primroses, pinks, sweet williams, larkspurs, sunflowers and roses, that broke into many-colored waves when the wind blew over them; the blue ponds dotted with the brown muskrat houses and the swimming ducks; the prairie chickens rising on strong wings before me; the bobolinks singing from the tall weeds.

I could see it in the gray-blue haze of autumn, dried and tawny, the amber sky streaming with the long dark lines of geese and ducks, of brant and crows and pigeons; and high over all, the circling sand-hill cranes, their wild cries falling faint from their dim height.

I could see it on a winter day, the ponds frozen, the sun sinking low to its setting, the winds flinging the snow high over the piling drifts.

A winter prairie and blowing snows will come to you with each passing year. But as long as man shall labor and civilization endure, that summer and that autumn prairie will never again be seen.

The deep pine woods of New England's story hills, and the wide hardwood forests of Ohio, Kentucky and Indiana, were long and stubborn in yielding to man, but the slender lines of the river forests of Blue Earth County were as quickly torn and destroyed as the delicate threads of a point-lace pattern.

Today I stood on the high washbank, looking down into the bottom lands of the old farm where once was heavy forest. Only corn fields and wheat waved there now. But I could see again the trees filling the river valley; the elms and cottonwoods with their clustered grapevines hanging

dark over the winding river; the Indian wigwams standing among the scarred maples, their bark coverings warped and crumbling, and around them the trilliums and hepaticas bursting fresh into bloom -- those frail flower lives that for untold ages had been the close companion of the Indian, and like him, soon to disappear in the never-ending tragedy of the ax and the plowshare.

Old log house and ancient forest! Far ages will come and go, and the events of those frontier days grow dim and legendary on the pages of ancient history to-be; but as long as civilization endures, a log house will never again be built, nor a crumbling mossy log be seen in all the Maple River valley, where once there were so many.

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