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ORTRAIT

of a PIONEER HOME

Edited by RODNEY C. LOEHR

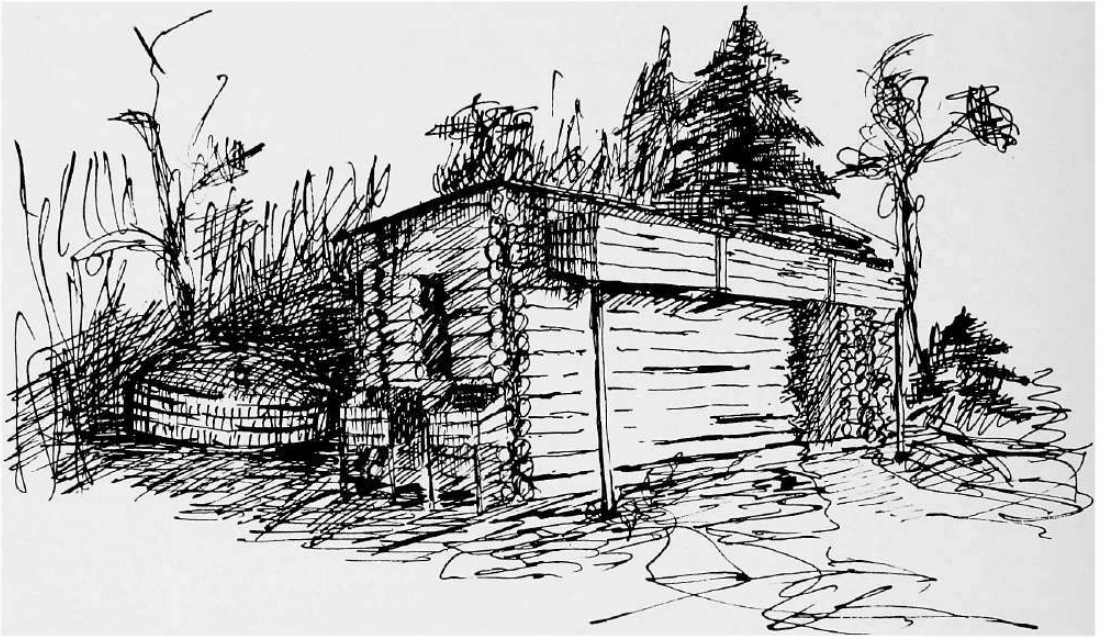
DETAILED recollections of pioneer homes are often found in the nostalgic pages of memoirs, but contemporary descriptions are rare indeed. Minnesota's early farmers, like others on the frontier, felt little need to record word pictures of scenes and objects which they viewed every day and which formed the setting of their toil-filled lives. An exception was Irvin W. Rollins, who occupied one bitterly cold winter evening in 1857 by writing into his diary a lengthy description of the Wabasha County homestead that he and his brother had settled the previous spring. Perhaps loneliness or homesickness moved him to do it, for the date was his twenty-eighth birthday, and he was far from parents and friends. Later he copied the passage in a letter to his sweetheart in Vermont.

Rollins was born on January 18, 1829, the son of Laban and Nancy Rollins of East Orange, Vermont. The father gave up his trade as a shoemaker in 1837 and moved to Topsham, where he engaged in farming. After attending school in East Orange and Topsham, Irvin studied at an academy in Corinth. Between the ages of seventeen and twenty-six he taught school in the winter, worked as a farm hand in the summer, and continued his education in brief sessions

whenever possible. During this time he also did a stint as a Bible salesman and worked for a few months in the mills at Lowell, Massachusetts. He migrated to Minnesota in the autumn of 1855 with his brother, Orvis.

The Rollins brothers took up claims near Plainview in Wabasha County and built a cabin in which they spent the winter with two other settlers. They found, however, that their claims were located on the Sioux half-breed tract and that the title to the land was in question. Therefore, early in the spring of 1856 they moved to Elgin and built a new cabin near the Whitewater River. There they raised wheat, garden produce, and even watermelons on the rich, sandy loam of the Whitewater Valley. So many Vermonters settled in Elgin Township that it became known locally as the "Yankee Neighborhood," although the first to arrive there had reportedly called it "Paradise."¹

In the summer of 1857 a new farm home was built, and Laban and Nancy Rollins joined their sons in Minnesota. Irvin returned to Vermont early in 1859 and married Ellen Keith on April 4, a union that was to produce four children. Back in the Whitewater Valley once more, he became a successful farmer and pioneer horticulturist. He



operated a nursery for many years, and his harvest of two hundred bushels of apples in 1871 encouraged others to experiment with planting orchards. Although Rollins never held an important public office, he was interested in community affairs. He was one of the first two justices of the peace in the township, and for many years he served as town clerk of Elgin and also as superintendent of the Methodist Sunday school there. He died in 1895.²

His diary, covering most of his years in Minnesota, is preserved in the manuscripts collection of the Minnesota Historical Society. It opens with a lengthy autobiographical account, written on March 30, 1856. The passage here reproduced is dated January 18, 1857.

A LOOK at our bachelor home. And first a bird's-eye view of the premises, and to get such a view one will be obliged to come quite near, for the location of our cabin, and its fixtures is such that it can be seen at no great distance in either direction. But as the winter road passes us, we will suppose ourselves to be coming from the S.W. in the direction of the road, and the object which

first attracts attention, seems to look like two stacks of hay, nearly covered with snow, and soon we may see still farther on a confused pile of indistinct objects, which we must await a nearer approach to decipher.

On approaching the hay ricks, one of them turns into a Minnesota stable, for we can see the door, and a small yard upon the least exposed side, which is the S.E. and still farther in the same direction, and across the road is seen the watering place, at the creek, where teamsters are in the habit of stoping [sic] to water their thirsty animals.³ A nearer inspection will give some idea of the mode of the construction of the stable. Posts are set in the ground, rising to the height of seven feet, and upon the tops of these are laid poles to form a scaffolding, upon which is piled hay, straw, or other material [sic] to

¹ Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge, *A History of Winona and Wabasha Counties*, 889 (Chicago, 1884). For an account of the half-breed tract, see William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1:324, 482 (St. Paul, 1956).

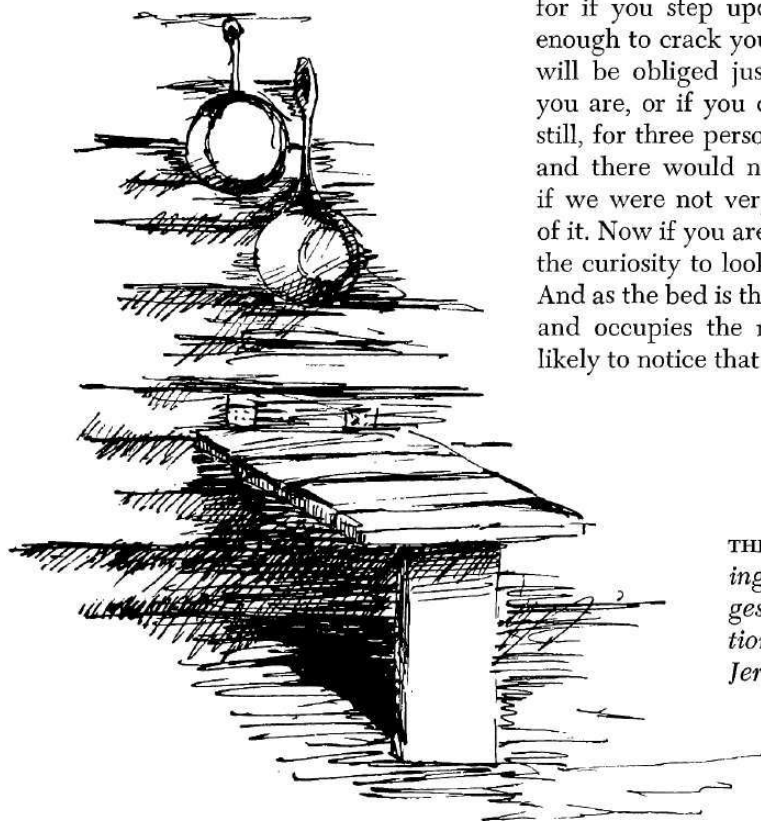
² Curtiss-Wedge, *Winona and Wabasha Counties*, 504, 892. Unless otherwise identified, biographical information is from Rollins' diary.

³ The creek referred to is the north branch of the Whitewater River.

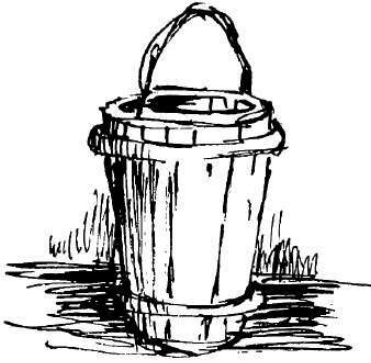
form the roof. on three sides are turf walls, cut from the prairie sward. the fourth side being the one next the hay rick, and about six feet from it [,] is inclosed by setting poles against the roof with one end resting on the ground, at an angle of forty five degrees, and these are covered with straw, one end being left open to admit the hay, and other fodder. Upon entering the stable door, which swings upon wooden hinges, you will have a view of the interior. at the right, are the stanchions for the oxen, six in number, and still nearer one for the cow, and still there is room for two more. At the left you will observe a pair of bars in miniature [*sic*], and upon inspection, it will be found that they have their use, for looking through, you will see in a dungeon, or a place quite as dark, two four legged animals, which as the light increases, while you look, prove to be calves. their apartment is separate from the other stable, and is formed of turf, with a

covering of straw, over and around which, the snow has gathered protecting it entirely from the weather.

Leaving the stable, we will approach the cabin. At the West end and only a few feet from it is a corn crib composed of small poles, and contains a hundred or more baskets of ears of corn. The cabin is a very small log one, with one roof of boards, with a small window in the South side, and in front of the window, are two boxes holding fifty bushels, set upon posts two or more feet from the ground, and filled with wheat, covered with boards. The cabin door is in the East end, and over the door is a shed made of boards. This contains our wood (when we have any) and some other articles for which we have no room in the cabin. On the North side of the cabin is what has the appearance of a large, oval pile of dirt, which is the covering of our cellar. And now having taken an outside view, we will enter the cabin, but please step over the threshold, for if you step upon it you will be likely enough to crack your pate. Once inside you will be obliged just to have a seat where you are, or if you cannot get one, to stand still, for three persons take up all the room, and there would not be enough for three, if we were not very economical in the use of it. Now if you are a yankee, you will have the curiosity to look at every thing in sight. And as the bed is the most prominent object, and occupies the most room, you will be likely to notice that first. It is upon a Minne-



THE sketches accompanying this article were suggested by Rollins' description. They were drawn by Jeremy G. Welsh.



sota bedstead, made of basswood, and is composed of a tick filled with straw, (but we had no straw, untill [sic] within two or three months, previous to which it was filled with prairie hay) with a quilt for a feather-bed, and the covering is a tack or comfortable, manufactured principally [sic] by myself, over which is spread a pair of white indian blankets. Beneath the bed are our trunks, a box filled with clothes, another filled with seeds of almost every description, one or two other boxes containing various articles, also three or four pairs of boots and shoes. Our table is a swing table with one leg, formed of a wide pine board, and upon the end next the cabin wall, is a box con-

taining patches, thread, needles, thimbles, beeswax, pins, &c. &c. and upon this box lie several books, and newspapers. The stove occupies the only place left for it, and upon one side is a shelf for the water-pail, beneath which we lay our wood, and in the other corner are some shelves for our dishes, and victuals, and under these stands a flour barrel [sic], covered with a cake-board. Over head in the highest part of the room, is a shelf upon which are laid our tools, ammunition-box [sic], &c. &c.

In another place are our guns, in a third our hats, caps, mittens, &c. Over the foot of the bed, suspended from one of the ribs, are three bags, containing respectively, seed-corn, wheat, and rice. The walls are principally [sic] covered with coats, breeches, fry-pans, griddles, &c. In the back part of the cabin, near the stove, is a small door, say two and a half feet square, which leads to our cellar it being but a few feet from the cabin, and the passage is covered similar to the cellar. The cellar is ten by twelve feet, high enough to clear a mans head, and contains our potatoes, and turnips, with a shelf for our milk &c.

BOYS WILL BE BOYS

The Minnesota Historical Society has in progress a search of the National Archives for records which may aid in the authentic restoration of Fort Snelling. Among many items of greater significance, the following tight-lipped communication regarding the men of the First Minnesota has been brought to light. It was written at the fort by Lieutenant T. M. Saunders on September 14, 1861, and addressed to Quartermaster General Montgomery C. Meigs.

Sir:

I have the honor to enclose herewith an estimate of the cost of some repairs absolutely needed at Fort Snelling, Minn., and will give as briefly as possible, my reasons for making the estimate.

When the 1st Regiment of Volunteers from this State was ordered to assemble at the Fort for the purpose of being mustered into Service, they took with them a six pounder and fired a salute within the walls, a proceeding never allowed before.

The concussion broke a great many sash and glass, and as the weather is getting quite cool, it is necessary, in order to make the Quarters habitable, to have the sash and lights put in again.

I was present when the damage was done, and tried to dissuade the men from firing within the Fort, but was told it was none of my business, they would fire as much as they pleased.

The men had not been mustered in at the time, and could not be controlled.



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