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Pioneer Life

Pioneer life has a special meaning in America. In less than 300 years, civilization spread across a vast continental wilderness. From the first landings in Virginia and Massachusetts in the early 1600's, American settlers kept pushing westward behind an ever moving frontier. Into wild country went hunters, trappers, fur traders, miners, frontier soldiers, surveyors, and pioneer farmers. The farmers tamed the land and made it productive. Every part of America had its pioneers.

Kinds of Pioneers

The pioneers were as varied as human nature. Some were adventurous and independent. Some were irresponsible and lazy, like the Indiana squatter who moved eight times without ever clearing timber or fencing a field. "To move," he said, "all I have to do is put out the fire and call the dog." But most of the pioneers were determined and industrious people. Silas Garber, for example, settled in a sod-roofed dugout on a prairie creek bank in 1871. Four years later he had succeeded in becoming the governor of Nebraska.

Most pioneers were willing to face toil and hardship for the sake of opportunity. They meant to carve homes out of the wilderness. Yankee farmers went west from the stony fields of New England, and Southern families went west from the crowded lands of Virginia and the Carolinas. Still other pioneers were immigrants newly arrived from Europe. English, Scotch, Welsh, and German pioneers went into the Ohio Valley. Scandinavian colonists settled mainly in the upper Mississippi Valley and on the Great Plains beyond the Missouri River.

Reasons for the Westward Movement

All of the pioneers hoped to find something better over the western horizon. New England families, tired of farming rocky valleys, were attracted to broad and fertile lands beyond the Appalachian Mountains. Southern farmers, suffering from bad luck or bad management, sought a new life in the West. To European immigrants the American frontier offered political freedom and economic opportunity. In the West, you could own your own land and work for your own future. For many people the West meant new opportunities.

In the Great Migration, which began after the War of 1812, multitudes of people went to the American interior. The population was growing in the eastern states. Families were large, and only one child could inherit the family home. The rest went to the growing cities or to the frontier. During hard seasons, when crops failed or when farm prices fell, many headed for a new beginning in the West.

Many went almost empty-handed to the frontier. They traveled light and arrived with only an ax and a rifle. Others carried heirlooms and farming tools. Some took seed corn and orchard shoots, cattle, hogs, and poultry. But how does one prepare for sickness and danger, for accident and misfortune? Some settlers failed and returned to the East. Those who stayed and survived turned a wilderness into a civilization.

Building a Cabin in the Clearing

On every new frontier the pioneers made homes for themselves, using what the wild land provided. In the great forests of the Ohio and Mississippi valleys the land provided timber. Here the pioneers' essential tool was the ax. The ax would clear the forest for the plow. But its first task was to shape a pioneer shelter.

When a family of settlers arrived at the spot where they planned to make their home, they began chopping saplings and trimming poles to build a lean-to. Between two forked trees they laid a crosspole. With the help of oxen or horses they rolled up a log, which was banked with dirt to form a low back wall. Then they laid poles, slanted upward, from the back log to the crosspole. The sloping roof was covered with bark and branches. The ends of the lean-to were walled with shorter poles and pickets. This was the pioneers' "half-faced camp." It always

faced south, away from wind and rain. In front of the open side they dug a fire pit. Logs smoldered there day and night, giving warmth and protection.

This served as a temporary home while the pioneer family prepared ground for their first crop. A real clearing took months of work, but a "deadening" could be done quickly. A few ax cuts were made in the tree trunks so that sap could not flow up to the branches. Soon the leaves withered, allowing sunlight to reach the damp soil. Seed corn was dropped into ax cuts in the ground. The crop from that crude planting provided food for the first winter.

Before winter came, the pioneer family hoped to have a small clearing and a snug cabin. The forest was the settlers' enemy—it had to be destroyed to create their fields. At the same time, it was their friend—it gave them logs for their cabin, fuel for their fire, rails for their fences, wheels for their wagon, and a frame for their plow.

Notched logs formed the cabin walls. A ridgepole at the peak supported lighter roof poles, and a bark thatching made the roof complete. Logs, split into flat-faced planks called puncheons, were used to make the cabin floor. Two openings, a window and a door, were sawed out with patient labor. Typically the first doorway covering was an old quilt weighted with a log; later a board door would be hung on leather hinges. The first window covering was greased paper, which turned away wind and water and admitted a dim light. Pioneers used any paper they had. One settler greased his wedding certificate with bear fat and put it in his window frame.

Opposite the cabin doorway was the yawning chimney mouth. Clay from the creek bank, mixed with dried grass, was formed into clumsy bricks, which hardened in the sun. Laid against the cabin wall, the bricks formed a "cat and clay" chimney with a broad opening. The fire that smoldered there gave heat for cooking, light, and warmth. Outside, the ax thudded and the smoke of brushfires hazed the air. Slowly the field was widened; a few new acres were cultivated every year. The cabin in the clearing was the pioneer homestead. When it gave way to a frame house, with a traveled road going past, the pioneer life had ended.

Traveling on the Overland Trails

In the 1840's and 1850's hundreds of thousands of pioneers made the long trek west to new frontiers in Oregon and California. For months they lived in covered wagons. These adventurers traveled in caravans, with 30 or more wagons rocking westward on the overland trails. On fine days a wagon train could cover 20 miles (32 kilometers); when the rains brought mud, they would be satisfied to cover half that distance.

When a caravan was large, it was divided into two groups. Behind the line of wagons came the "cow column"—milk cows and spare oxen driven by men and boys on horseback. At night the wagons drew into a circle and the oxen were turned loose to graze. Men took turns at guard duty under the western stars.

At first daylight the guards went around the circle shouting "Arise! Arise!" Cows were milked while breakfast sizzled on the fire. The oxen were yoked and the wagons pulled into line. As the long bullwhips cracked, another day's travel began.

At noon the captain called a halt on a prairie ridge or beside a creek bank. While lunch was laid out, children ran over the prairie, gathering buffalo "chips" for the evening fire. (Buffalo dung was the travelers' main source of fuel.) After an hour's rest the march started again. The sun beat down, and heat waves shimmered on the horizon. When the shadows lengthened behind them, the captain began looking for a camping place. Supper was a restful meal. Children ran from one campfire to another. Men talked about the next day's travel, and women talked about the homes they would have at the end of the journey. After a fiddler played a few tunes, the people went to bed, some in the wagons, others on the ground. When the fires died down, the night wind brought the haunting call of coyotes.

Sunday was commonly a day of rest. However, even on Sundays the women washed clothes and baked bread, and the men repaired harnesses and greased the wagon wheels. While dinner was cooking, the whole company

gathered in the shade of the circled wagons as the captain read a chapter from the Bible. Most often they turned to the Book of Exodus, which told of people wandering in the wilderness, seeking a promised land.

Settling on the Great Plains

On the Great Plains, which were settled soon after the Civil War (1861–65), the pioneers built their first dwellings with the deeply rooted grass. Here farmers plowed up building material while breaking their first fields. With a spade they cut the furrows into 3-foot (1-meter) lengths. These they piled up like bricks, leaving openings for a door and window. Roof poles came from willow thickets along the infrequent prairie creeks. When a layer of sod covered the crisscrossed poles, the house was completed. It was cool in summer, warm in winter, windproof, and fireproof. But it did not keep out water. Spring rains seeped through the sod roof long after the sky had cleared. Sometimes a pioneer would have to hold an umbrella over the fire to cook a meal.

Outside the sod shanty a settler chopped into the broken ground and dropped seed corn into each cut. A year of wind and weather would soften the field for cultivation. But the first crop was sod corn, growing in the matted grass roots. On the prairie lay buffalo bones left by hide hunters. Pioneer settlers hauled wagon loads of bones to the nearest railroad town, trading them for a wooden door, a glass-paned window, or some joints of stovepipe. The bones were ground up for fertilizer.

Near the first sod hut other pioneers marked their claims with a "straddlebug"—three boards nailed in a flimsy pyramid. New "soddies" appeared on the prairie, with new breakings beside them. These small fields, almost lost in the blowing grasslands, were the beginning of a changed country. In a few years roads were graded along the section lines, settlements sprang up at the township corners, and wheat and corn grew where the buffalo grass had been.

Way Of Life

Whatever their surroundings, the pioneers had to depend on themselves and on the land. Self-reliance was a frontier requirement. Game provided food and leather clothing. New settlers gathered wild fruits, nuts, and berries. For salt they boiled the water of saline springs. Maple sugar was made by tapping maple trees in early spring and boiling the sap until it thickened into a tasty sweetening. Substitutes for tea and coffee were provided by boiling sassafras root and brewing parched corn and barley. With an ax and adze for cutting tools, the pioneers made beds, tables, benches, and stools. They split logs into rails to make the zigzag fence that enclosed their clearings.

Pioneer women learned to supply their own household goods. Gourds served as pails and dippers. Wood ash was sifted to make soap. Tallow (sheep and cattle fat) was molded into candles. Every cabin had two spinning wheels—a big wheel for wool and a smaller wheel for flax. With their own home-woven "linsey-woolsey," a coarse cloth of mixed linen and wool, pioneer women made their family's clothing. Clothes were also made from animal skins, which the pioneers tanned into leather.

Winter was a hard season on the frontier. In bitter weather the family huddled around the fire. When there was no leather, some people went barefoot and suffered frostbite. Food was scanty and monotonous. For months there were no fresh fruits or vegetables. In early spring, women looked eagerly for the first wild mustard and dandelion plants, which they could boil into a dish of "greens."

Walter Havighurst

Author

First Book of Pioneers

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Document D (Modified)

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