PIONEER DAYS IN WISCONSIN

by

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We were truly pioneers when we came to Pierce County, Wisconsin, in the spring of 1889. My father bought eighty acres of virgin forest to be transformed into farm land that could produce a living for us. Meanwhile we lived with a bachelor uncle across the road from the new acquisition.

In the winters, devastation of the trees was work number one. Men were kept busy cutting down the finest trees making them into railroad ties, piling, cordwood, and such things. In the spring the branches and rejected parts were gathered in huge piles and burned. Such a waste of what nature had taken perhaps centuries to provide for the benefit of man, birds, and beasts. Eventually some land was cleared of all but the tree stumps. Then farming began. This was called a clearing.

A walking plow was drawn by a team of horses or oxen and steered by a man who knew how to handle it. Plowing was done as close to the stumps as possible. Seeding was done with a little hand machine or strowed. Harvesting was a slow job. The grain was cradled down so it could be tied by hand into bundles. This latter job was for the women to do. I remember watching this done but was too young to be of any help.

After a season or two of this the stumps were removed by dynamiting. An expert at this work was a man we all called Gopons. He loved the bottle and thus drank a lot and when he indulged he invariably said it was a Go Pons, a good punch. Then the stumps had to be burned.

When the stumps were all cleared away the land could be plowed and disked in straight furrows and seeded and harvested with bigger machinery.

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The reaper was used. I remember when my uncle got a binder. One that tied
the bundles as the grain was cut. We cut our grain that way too. As time
went on the farmers got new binders. The mowers were in use for cutting
the hay but where hay was grown amid the stumps men who had become experts
with the scythe were hired for the haying season. Domestic hay on virgin
land was very heavy and made a lot of tiring work.

Before long I was pressed into service in haying time. We used wooden
rakes with long wooden teeth in them. Much bigger than garden rakes.

We had log fences that went like this \\ / and we younger ones
had to rake the hay out of the fence corners and from around the stumps.
Then if it had rained, the hay had to be turned to dry the under side.
Then when the hay racks came we had to rake the hay together so it could be
picked up with pitchforks and piled up on the hay rack. It was hot work as
we had to work fast. I should have mentioned that when the hay was dry it
was gathered into rounded cocks.

After the grain was cut, the bundles were gathered about eight bundles
to a shock. When sufficiently dry these bundles were hauled up, not too
far from the barn, and put up in stacks. Several loads full to a stack.
The stacks far enough apart for the threshing machine to go between them.

Threshing time was fun time. The whole neighborhood exchanged help.
Much of the baking was done ahead. The neighbors started coming very early
to eat breakfast before going to work. We could count on about twenty
men. About ten o'clock they were all served lunch consisting of sandwiches,
cookies, cake and coffee. This was brought out to them. At noon they all
came in for dinner. Four o'clock was lunch time again and then after that
they threshed until dark. You may wonder what so many would find to do.
A couple of men would cut the twine on the bundles, another couple of them
pitched the bundles to the machine. One or two pitched the straw away from the machine and piled it up in a stack. Then two or three carried the grain, that had been run into sacks, to the granary where it was dumped into bins. We had to have a goodly number of sacks which had been carefully looked over and patched beforehand. Oh yes, and a couple of men hauled tanks of water for the engine. A goodly pile of wood was provided in advance for the engineer to keep the engine going. We generally had them two or three days before they moved to the next place. Mother always had someone helping her on these busy days.

Oh yes, only a few stacks in each place. At least one set of stacks in the pasture. It provided both food and shelter for the cattle. We children used to play in those big straw stacks. A good place for hide and seek.

Who's complaining of beds nowadays. It was years before we had bed springs. We acquired new beds equipped with wooden slats crossways, and it was some time before I ever saw a bed spring.

Seeing blue striped ticking takes me back in memory to our mattresses. A mattress cover was made of this material with a generous length opening in the middle. This was filled with new straw soon after threshing time. This lasted for a year until next year's straw was available. What fun we children had when that was done. We were allowed to do the stuffing after emptying the old straw. Care had to be taken to stuff the straw evenly so mother had to do some redistributing when they were returned to the beds. Eventually these gave place to manufactured ones. Likewise as time went on we acquired new bed springs and one iron bedstead. We thought that was really tops at that time.