CHAPTER V.

DIFFICULTIES OF EARLY FARMING.

The struggles and hardships coincident with pioneer life are familiar topics, yet each new country has its own peculiar difficulties. In Dane county the first formidable drawbacks were those of markets and prices. Even the most ingenious and economical pioneer had to depend to a considerable extend on eastern supplies. Flour and pork were the standard articles of food, and as they had to be brought up the Mississippi river or from New York or Ohio, the prices were exorbitant. The first demand for any considerable amount of provisions in southern Wisconsin was for supplying the needs of the lead miners, and they paid dearly for their living; one man speaks of giving four thousand pounds of mineral for a barrel of flour.[59]

In the spring of 1837 a party of land prospectors paid to Mrs. Masters of Jefferson one dollar per peck for oats; at the same time pork was reported to be worth twenty-one dollars per barrel, and flour forty-one dollars; a cow was worth forty dollars, and a yoke of oxen one hundred fifty dollars.[60]

In Milwaukee, corn was quoted at two and a half dollars per bushel, eggs as high as one and a half dollars a dozen, and butter at forty-five and fifty cents per pound.[61] This certainly was a rare chance for a limited number of farmers to grow rich rapidly; but few farmers were here at all and they for the most part were slow in getting any produce on the market. Such lines as the following must, however, have had a stimulating effect on all who were getting their farming operations under way: "Hundreds

[59] *Wis. Hist. Coll.*, II, 335.
[60] *Ibid.*, X, 425.
[61] Milwaukee *Advertiser*, February 25, 1837.

of barrels of pork are annually imported from below on account of a lack of farmers to supply the great demand for this article from the mines." [62]

Some idea of the manner of making a home in the wilderness may be gathered from the reminiscences of an old Rock county pioneer: "During the summer of '37 I made a claim on the bank of the Rock river three miles above Jefferson. In December following I took an ax, a ham of pork, and a blanket, walked down to Jefferson, bought a few loaves of bread of E. G. Darling, also borrowed a boat of him—went up to my claim to make the necessary improvements to hold it until spring.

"I worked upon my claim for four weeks, chopping trees, building fences, etc. Having made the necessary improvements on my claim, I went back to Rock river to work until spring. During the winter I picked enough cat-tails to make me a bed. Also caught and salted a keg of fish, bought a yoke of oxen and prepared to go onto my claim in the spring. In April, '38, I borrowed the hind wheels of a wagon, put in a temporary tongue and box, loaded up my shanty outfit, drove to Ft. Atkinson and crossed the river on the ferry, thence to Jefferson; again ferried across, cut my own road through the timber, three miles, and reached my claim. The next day I took the wagon on the boat borrowed of Mr. Darling and returned it to Bark river running the distance of twenty miles, and returned to my farm the next day ready for farming. I cleared about two acres, made a harrow with wooden teeth, and planted the land with corn and potatoes. I paid four dollars a bushel for seed corn to plant. The corn not coming up the first time, I replanted June 3, paying sixpence an ear for the seed. Raised a splendid crop of corn and potatoes. The nearest grist mill was at Beloit and several Jefferson people carried their corn there to grind. One of my neighbors, Mr. Britton, dug a hole in an oak stump for a mortar and pounded his corn to supply a large family. Having raised something to live on and having built comfortable houses to live in, we all turned our attention to building roads through the timber. A territorial road was opened from Milwaukee to Madison by the United States Government in 1838 and '39—at this time I went to Milwaukee for a load of pro-

[62] *Wisconsin Enquirer*, November 2, 1839.

visions: It cost two dollars per hundred weight to haul goods from Milwaukee to Bark River Mill."[63]

A still earlier settler relates experiences much the same.[64]

A writer in the Watertown Republic of July 3d, 1889, speaks of making a sled by hand at Milwaukee, paying sixty dollars for three barrels of flour, eighty dollars for two barrels of pork, and with two yoke of oxen as the team starting westward for Watertown. Many instances are recorded of five dollars a barrel being paid for hauling flour from Milwaukee to Madison and it is little wonder when two yoke of cattle were required for moving ten or twelve hundred weight of goods. Before the road above mentioned was laid out each teamster went where he pleased and he usually tried a new route "knowing that a change must necessarily be an improvement."

The newcomers were almost uniformly without capital in any form beyond a team of oxen, a wagon, and a few household articles. Many a determined home-seeker, discouraged by business failure or low wages in the east came to Wisconsin with barely enough money to pay his passage, and after selecting a farm and filing preëmption papers, or quite as often, engaging some friendly neighbor to use his influence in preventing its being "jumped," started for the pineries and hired out as a chopper thus earning enough to pay for a forty or two. These experiences were not wholly uneventful. One Vermont youth after walking a considerable share of the distance from Milwaukee to Dane county, locating his claim, and making his way to a northern pinery was told by the lumberman that he already had more help than he wanted. Nothing daunted he resolved on appropriating some of the free timber himself and set to work making a raft to take to Dubuque in the spring in hopes of finding a

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[63]Quoted with some slight changes for the sake of brevity from Janesville *Gazette*, June 24, 1886, *Wis. Local Hist. Coll.*, XVIII.

[64]"My father had raised the body of a hewn log house, which was considered very nice then. His first thought was to finish that so we would be more comfortable. The boards for the floor and shingles for the roof had to be gotten out by hand, but it was at last accomplished, and some time in January we moved into it. The next thought was to obtain seed for spring sowing, so my father hewed out timber for building purposes, rafted it down the river to Janesville where he sold it and bought potatoes, paying $5 per bushel, and beans the same. That of course did not mean many to eat, but as soon as they could grow we had plenty."—Watertown *Republic*, June 26, 1889, *Wis. Local Hist. Coll.*, 11.

market. All went well till on his way down the Wisconsin, afloat with his entire stock of goods, the clumsy raft went to pieces in the Baraboo rapids and was at once converted into worthless driftwood. This would seem to be enough to cure the western fever in almost any case, but not so this time. He retraced his steps to his native state, married a wife of equal pluck, and with a few borrowed dollars again set out for Wisconsin and the claim he had located, found it awaiting him, and he is still the owner of it together with many contiguous acres. At the risk of wandering a little from the subject we must follow this man a stage or two farther. He served three years in a Wisconsin regiment in the Civil War, homesteaded and preëmpted half or three quarters of a section in Dakota when the first general rush to that territory occured, and in 1900, forty-nine years after his first visit to Wisconsin, spent a summer in Cuba grubbing out brush and planting fruit, and already has bearing bananas in the island. This is a sample of the stuff that the genuine American pioneer was made of.

The importance of the little markets at the mines and pineries was greatly overestimated. "For many years to come the surplus produce of the settlers will find a ready and profitable market at the Wisconsin pineries, Ft. Winnebago, and other points on the river." [65]

By the time the first farmers were fairly settled and had succeeded in producing a little more plain food-stuff than was needed for family use, the much-vaunted "home market" bubble had burst. In the early '40's butter sold at the country stores as low as five, or even three cents a pound. Wheat was worth from thirty to fifty cents in Milwaukee and the cost of hauling it there was equal to half or two-thirds of its value. Hogs although few, as we now view it, were a drug on the market, and after being dressed were often hauled forty or sixty miles to the pineries to be bartered for shingles, and in many cases the load of meat would no more than pay for a load of shingles.[66] Pork was quoted at two and three cents, beef about the same, and even at these figures the payment was seldom made in cash, there being almost no cash in the country, and that little going for taxes and postage stamps.

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[65] *Wisconsin Enquirer*, November 14, 1840.

[66] I stayed one rainy day the summer of 1901 in a house in Dane county which still had shingles on the roof obtained in this way—it leaked.

Barter was the only alternative to a complete stoppage of trade, and in consequence it was used as thoroughly as though money had no place in the economy of that time. Butter, eggs, turnips, and what not, were peddled around Madison by farmers who had brought them a distance of twenty miles only to find that the discouraged storekeeper would take no more produce at any price. And the townspeople who did take it often paid with an order on the storekeeper, and this paper usually had to be approved by the storekeeper before it was accepted by the truck vender. These were indeed the days of small things.

Few of the early settlers had any draught animal besides the ox, and not infrequently even this was wanting. The first man to till the soil in the town of Vermont had no equipment other than a spade and a hoe.[67] Occasionally cows were yoked to the wagon or the plow, and only once in a long while was a farmer found who owned a horse. All things considered the ox was the most suitable for pioneer motive power. He was slow, but not so helpless in a swamp, not so dainty in the matter of food and drink, not so sensitive to cold or wet, or so dependent upon three regular meals a day as the horse. Until experience taught them better the pioneers used a breaking plow twenty, thirty, even thirty-six inches wide, and for moving these ponderous ditching machines, which must be run at a great depth in order to keep them steady, much power was required and the movement was necessarily slow. For this work some six or eight yoke of cattle with two or three drivers were required. Often the oxen were fed only grass which they must gather for themselves at night. At noon but a short pause was made to allow the men to eat their lunch, it being too great a task to yoke up a herd of unwilling half-broken oxen more than once a day. In case the ox and his owner were both new at the business progress was slow indeed, and it is a wonder that any headway at all was made. A concrete example of this will illustrate the seriousness of the problem. An Englishman, two years in this country, and wholly without experience in working cattle, entered a piece of land in the northwest part of the county, and bought at the same time a pair of young untrained oxen. At the end of the first season he had plowed five acres of oak openings—"if you could call it plowin' " as he remarked with a grim smile.

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[67] *History of Dane County*, 933.

In case the new arrival had no means of doing breaking the first year, he could hire a few furrows turned by paying at the rate of five dollars per acre.[68] Later the price of breaking fell to two dollars, and two and a half dollars per acre, the former price for prairie, the latter for oak openings or such woodland as could be plowed without the use of the ax and grub-hoe, yet it is agreed that in the manner the work was done, more "openings" than prairie could be plowed in a day.

A lack of suitable implements was a serious inconvenience quite as often as lack of teams. Grain was cut with a sickle, a scythe, a cradle; was bound by hand, threshed with a flail, winnowed by being tossed into the air with a shovel, pounded to flour in a wooden mortar, baked in a rude oven, and the bread eaten without butter.[69] Men who had never shown a tendency to any description of skilled workmanship turned their hands to a multitude of home manufactures—ax-helves, flour-chests, tables, chairs, beds, baskets, rakes, harrows, rollers; in short those who had once depended on the various members of the community for everything, again became in a great degree independent, but lost their one art, which perhaps was overdeveloped, to gain a primitive knowledge of blacksmithing, carpentry, masonry, healing, hunting, fishing—little wonder that there was not energy and skill left over to make anything more than mediocre farmers. Blacksmithing was perhaps the greatest bug-bear in this category. Until there was promise of sufficient work to enable a man to earn a living at the forge, few cared to set one up, and the stories told of trials in getting blacksmith work done are many and picturesque. As much as they would stand plow-shares were beaten out cold; sometimes they were heated in a fire of chips on the open ground and hammered out on an iron wedge driven into a stump in lieu of an anvil. One man, wishing to give his tired oxen a rest, carried the share of his breaking plow to Madison, had it sharpened, and returned the same day, making the entire round trip of forty miles on foot. Another man after vain attempts to "toggle" his log-chain found that the splices took up too much of the length, so putting the pieces into a grain sack and

[68] *History of Wisconsin*, by W. R. Smith, pp. 121 and 122.

[69] Every item of this may be proved by people who were familiar with that mode of life in Dane county.

taking it across his shoulder he lugged it ten miles to a blacksmith shop.

But the entire lack of a plow was one of the worst misfortunes, though even this was not necessarily fatal to agricultural operations.[70]

Thus the tale goes and might easily fill a volume, but a mere snap shot at these scenes is all that the present work can admit. Let it be remembered, however, that these very conditions, trivial though they may seem, had an important rôle to play in the prosperity and the character-building of the pioneer. It is true that he solved these perplexing problems because of an inborn and inimitable tact, but it is equally true that in the solution itself the frontiersman gained a self-reliance, a mastery of the situation, a tough body, and a clear head—all of which were needed in good time—but that is another story.

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[70] "Mr. F. C. Kirkpatrick, who came to the county in 1827, related his first effort at plowing, being the first plowing done in the present limits of Grant county. He had a horse and harness, but nothing in the similitude of a plow. The framework he easily manufactured similar to the frame of a single shovel; through the beam he inserted a pick, commonly called a sinking pick. With this and his one horse he broke about two acres. The two acres produced a bountiful harvest of corn. The corn was taken to Armstrong's mill, near where Dickeyville now stands, and ground, or rather cracked, the cracklings were grated and the gratings made into bread. In those days we went to Galena for our supply of necessaries."—*Wis. Local Hist. Coll.*, 13, from *County Gazette* (Grant county).