

# The Way of the Frontier

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**F**ROM a sky as blue as the chicory in the grass, sunlight fell across a clearing and reached golden fingers back among the trees. The clearing itself, its leaf-molded surface, was marked with fresh-cut stumps and littered with yellow flakes and chips that the ax had cut from the trunks piled roughly to one side—trunks not yet trimmed of their branches and freshly pointed from the blows of the ax.

On one of the stumps in the clearing sat a man and his wife. The sleeve of his linsey hunting shirt was ripped, his brown leggings were half hidden by the blue folds of her full, rough skirt, and his feet in their scuffed shoepacks braced the ground for support as if he was ready to spring erect at a sound. His hunting shirt, held close about his waist by a belt and lapping over double in front, hung with its red fringe almost to his knees. At his elbow stood his rifle. His other hand steadied the ax, and from the polished edge of its blade the sun struck light.

Such figures were part of the everyday picture of pioneer life in western Pennsylvania. The settler and the woman who made his cabin a home must often have paused, in many a clearing in the forests that covered the western end of the state, to look

for a moment at what they had done. The long road they had recently left led west no longer. They had reached its end. It ran east now, from the clearing on the frontier's edge. These were moments when, tired but hopeful, they stopped to realize not the struggle but the beauty, not the doubts but the achievements, not the weariness and hardship of the journey but the rest and the promise of home. Now they could look, not at thickset trees to be cut and the unfinished door or chimney of their cabin, not at the rough-surfaced ground to be plowed and the threat of storm in the sky, but at the sunlight in the clearing as it fell on the scattered tree chips and the chicory flowers at their feet, when the hand could be free of the rifle and could relax on the haft of the ax.

These were the true pioneers, the man and woman who had come out on foot, driving perhaps one lean cow or carrying all their belongings on their backs. During the first year of their life in the wilderness they ate mostly potatoes and slept on clean leaves gathered in the woods. These first settlers found seed so scarce that when a hen ate the melon seeds laid in the sun to dry they cut open the hen's crop and sewed it up again, so as not to lose either the seeds or the hen. They were the kind of men and women who would rather live in crude cabins set in small and slovenly clearings than remain as indentured servants in the eastern counties and states; the kind of men and women who worked on, half-starved for lack of proper food because they had been tricked by land speculators into thinking they were going into a land of honey and milk; the kind of men and women who had accepted the hard life of the frontier because land in the East was scarce and expensive. These were

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the early home-makers who, because they often could not afford oxen or horses to draw their plows, were unable to cultivate their lands properly and could only scratch over the surface with a dead branch or at best a hoe. But they were the people who had the courage to face hardship and death, who had great physical strength, who were impatient of discipline, and who were capable of fighting for their own beliefs.

Ahead lay endless trouble—sheep and hogs devoured by wolves; horses and cattle wandering into the fields and trampling the growing grain; corn destroyed by squirrels and raccoons; crops ruined by frost or drought. The men worked in the fields with their rifles, those who could afford them, stacked close by under the watch of a sentinel. The women were the pioneer mothers who came to the frontier young, healthy, and strong-hearted, who undertook endless household duties, who endured loneliness, starvation, dread of Indian massacre, and perhaps the grief of seeing their children and husbands taken into captivity. These men and women the frontier took, drained from them the strength and freshness of youth, and left them creased and browned and warped, old men and women at thirty-five.

These people, with ax and maul and wedge, had set out to wrest from this new life the economic security denied them in the place whence they had come. With no other tools, frequently, but with grim, set purpose, they were determined to win self and community respect. And often they attained real happiness.

The real pioneer was a home-maker, a cabin builder. He had come West for many reasons, but first among them always

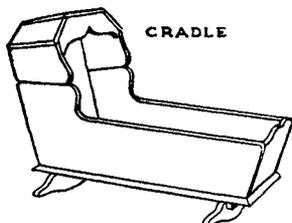


CHURNING BUTTER

was the desire to get land, raise his cabin, and win a living for himself and his family in his own way. In the wilderness homes along the streams and roads and on the hills of western Pennsylvania was born that free spirit which marks the laws and institutions of our present-day civilization. The home-making pioneer, in organizing his family life, organized the life of his community. In erecting his cabin in the clearing, he erected the symbol of America for years to come.

The pioneer was hard-featured. Lean and weather-beaten, often stooped by hardship and toil, his skin an unhealthy color from improper food, he was not always the hearty, robust man one would expect from active life in the open. Border life was particularly harsh with women. The dates on old grave-stones show that many died years before their husbands, and often several women bore the same man's name. Widows were few; they remarried for protection and to guard against starving. Many children died at birth or in their first year or two of life. If they grew to manhood or womanhood they became the typical, sinewy, roughened frontiersmen and frontier mothers. Poor sanitation and lack of hygienic knowledge bred skin diseases and lice. Cleanliness was difficult, and illiteracy common. But there is a great deal more to the story than that, as we shall see.

The pioneer was industrious. Only hard work day after day built his log cabin, made his puncheon floors, his split-log bed frames and tables. Only strenuous digging, sowing, raking, and threshing would provide his family with grain and vegetables. There was hunting to be done, for game which he hauled home to skin, cut up, and cure.

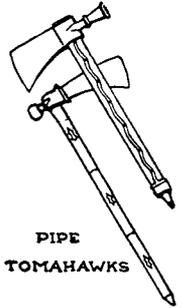


CRADLE

The pioneer was resourceful. He had to be, with few tools, without shops and stores to run to for his wants, and with few near neighbors to give advice and help. He had harsh weather and wild beasts to contend with. When ill or the victim of an accident in the woods or along the trails he had no first-aid kit of handy remedies. He faced danger from the Indians. And he had at times to deal with wrong-thinking, wrong-doing men—a thief, a land cheat, or a deliberate squatter. All these problems had to be dealt with quickly; otherwise, he lost out. He might lose property, the few furnishings of his home, or even his life. He might lose his health or his reputation as an honest man. Against such things he had to be constantly on guard.

Bravery in Indian raids and battles had to be joined with courage to bear pain—a wound from an accidental discharge of a gun, a gash from a knife or an ax, a snake bite, an arm or leg muscle torn in a hidden trap or in a fight with a bear.

The frontier demanded far more than physical courage. Lonely months had to be endured, in which no stranger or friend passed by the little cabin. Family ties, broken when settlers started out for the new lands, pulled at the heartstrings. News came from the old, far-away world of the death of a brother or a sister. Worry about food when stores ran low in winter, suffering from disease when no doctor or remedy was at hand, and times of longing for the old life with its brighter, more comfortable days often discouraged the pioneer. There were men and women, broken in health and spirit, whose minds were not strong enough to fight against worry and despair brought on by loneliness or by Indian captivity and possible torture of members of their families. Early records contain



PIPE  
TOMAHAWKS

many stories of strange people living alone—hermits, witches, and other queer characters that life had bent out of their natural shapes. All these things were the price the pioneers paid to win a new world for later generations. But greater than their sufferings were their hope and their faith in the life they had chosen.

One of these early settlers has left a description of the first years of his life with his family on the edge of the frontier:

“It was very lonesome for several years. People would move in, and stay a short time, and move away again. . . . I started, with my two yoke of oxen, to go to Jersey Shore, to mill, to procure flour. I crossed Pine Creek eighty times going to, and eighty times coming from mill, was gone eighteen days, broke two axletrees to my wagon, upset twice, and one wheel came off in crossing the creek. . . .

“The few seeds that I was able to plant the first year, yielded but little produce. We however raised some half-grown potatoes, some turnips, and soft corn, with which we made out to live, without suffering, till the next spring, at planting time, when I planted all the seeds that I had left; and when I finished planting, we had nothing to eat but leeks, cow-cabbage, and milk. We lived on leeks and cow-cabbage as long as they kept green—about six weeks. . . . during the three winter months it snowed 70 days. I sold one yoke of my oxen in the fall, the other yoke I wintered on browse; but in the spring one ox died, and the other I sold to procure food for my family, and was now destitute of a team, and had nothing but my own hands to depend upon to clear my lands and raise provisions. We wore out all our shoes the first year. We had no way to get more,—

no money, nothing to sell, and but little to eat,—and were in dreadful distress for the want of the necessaries of life. I was obliged to work and travel in the woods barefooted. After a while our clothes were worn out. Our family increased, and the children were nearly naked. I had a broken slate that I brought from Jersey Shore. I sold that . . . and bought two fawn-skins, of which my wife made a petticoat for Mary; and Mary wore the petticoat until she outgrew it; then Rhoda took it till she outgrew it; then Susan had it, till she outgrew it; then it fell to Abigail, and she wore it out.”

How true this picture is we know from comparing it with other records of the early years when the wilderness of western Pennsylvania was being prepared for the farms and well-built towns that we pass now while driving over smooth roads that often follow the early trails made by these pioneer men and women.

And yet because of his solitude the pioneer was hospitable, hailing and welcoming the stranger to his home. One of those pleasant books that contain first-hand accounts of pioneer life, John L. McConnel's *Western Characters or Types of Border Life in the Western States*, relates how the stranger was received in the frontier cabin:

“But he [*the pioneer*] is neither unsocial, nor morose. He welcomes the stranger as heartily as the most hospitable patriarch. He receives the sojourner at his fireside without question. He regales him with the best the house affords: is always anxious to have him ‘stay another day.’ He cares for his horse, renews his harness, laughs at his stories, and exchanges romances with him. He hunts with him; fishes, rides, walks, talks,

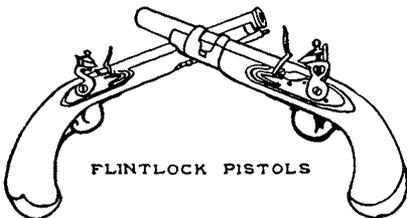


DUTCH OVEN

eats, and drinks with him. His wife washes and mends the stranger's shirts, and lends him a needle and thread to sew a button on his only pair of pantaloons. The children sit on his knee, the dog lies at his feet, and accompanies him into the woods. The whole family are his friends, and only grow cold and distant when they learn that he is looking for land, and thinks of 'settling' within a few leagues. If nothing of the sort occurs—and this only 'leaks out' by accident, for the pioneer never pries inquisitively into the business of his guest, he keeps him as long as he can; and when he can stay no longer, fills his saddle-bags with flitches of bacon and 'pones' of corn-bread, shakes him heartily by the hand, exacts a promise to stop again on his return, and bids him 'God-speed' on his journey."

The same scarcity of acquaintances and associates that made the pioneer warm and constant in friendship also made him bitterly angry at injustice done to him, to his family, or to his belongings. People who live much alone feel ordinary human emotions the more strongly, perhaps, because the emotions are stored up and when they find expression they pour out more violently for having been pent up so long. If frontier revenge seems sometimes extreme to us, if frontier justice and punishments seem sometimes harsh and cruel, we must take conditions into account.

A historian who has studied very carefully the frontier in American history writes of the decline of knowledge on the frontier and of the increase of "lawlessness," in the sense of the pioneer's disregard of those laws that he considered unnecessary or unjust. We must admit that what he says has truth in it. Books and papers were scarce, and much of what the pio-



FLINTLOCK PISTOLS

neer had learned in his earlier settled community, with its schools, churches, libraries, and papers, became useless and was forgotten. These facts explain the rawness of early American civilization; but they also explain its strength and promise. In many a family's scant belongings, however, carried over the mountains in cart or on pack horse, or on foot in a cloth-wrapped bundle, was a Bible or a copy of Shakespeare. From the Bible more than one frontier child learned to read by fire-light or rushlight. And these little flames of culture and knowledge were cared for as carefully as the rows of beans and pumpkins outside the cabin door.

The "lawlessness" of the frontiersman might be explained by his refusal to be wronged, his independence, his courage, his active sense of justice. Lawlessness, in its true sense, means the breaking of just and reasonable laws. This is not characteristic of Americans. Americans have inherited from these pioneer men and women, who had been trained in the hard school of experience to win the rights of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," an unusual sense of what is just in lawmaking. It was to establish these rights more firmly that pioneers struggled in the wilderness; they wanted personal liberty and economic freedom, the right to a full life. In the pursuit of happiness these men and women sought the unsettled lands of the western country. And they defended their enterprise sturdily, whether they were threatened by poor living, Indians, illness and hunger, or by unjust officials and intruders.

Frontier people were often grave and heavy-spirited. Howling winter winds, the cry of wolves, the screech of owls through the clearing—such sounds on the strained ears of a family

huddled close to the crude chimney place in a smoke-filled cabin night after night might start their minds working upon fantastic ideas. Such sounds came to be omens of misfortune—of accident, illness, and death. Often enough they were heard when worry had already turned the thoughts of the listeners toward trouble that could be seen ahead. The pioneers thought and felt in ways strange to us, ways not at all practical but highly imaginative, although not properly so. For instance, it takes imagination to associate the baying of a dog with the death of some one you love, but it is not healthy imagination. It takes imagination to feel that the cry of an owl means danger ahead, but that, too, is not healthy imagination. There was, of course, some reason for thinking an owl's cry was a warning, for prowling Indians might have disturbed the bird. But the pioneer made many unreasonable associations between sounds and misfortunes and became a superstitious person.

Yet these people were not always somber and pathetic, not always straining body and mind to earn a bare living. Simple and plain in person, dress, and speech, the pioneer yet broke out occasionally into salty speech and dashing, boisterous action. At house raisings and weddings, at quilting bees and *schnitzens* (apple parings), there was a great deal of rough festivity. In the cramped cabins, on the puncheon floors, lit by the faint radiance of tallow dips or smoky pine knots or by the smelly wicks of Betty lamps, happy groups would dance and swirl, noisily, unrestrainedly, because such occasions were rare. And the faint light brought out the soft color of homespun dresses, red and blue and saffron yellow. The brown breeches and leggings of the men in their checkered hunting shirts wove

in and out among twirling skirts to the scratching tune of a fiddle in the corner, in the firelight. Or, on a summer night, the same scene took place outside the cabin, where moonlight slanted across the dancing forms and softened the figures and the crude homespun garments.

So we see the frontiersman as a many-sided personality. This new and difficult life that he faced made him in turn open-natured or reserved; stern or gay; heroic, yet as often pitiable. And he never lost a sense of beauty and wonder. The fury of winds and storms, though threatening and disastrous, held him in awe. He saw day after day the beech trunks gilded by sunlight and the dimness of great forests, quiet as a sleeping child. He saw the violets by the palisades and the wild mint by the creek edge. He saw the sun flame over the mountains and the purple of twilight deepen to thick black of night. Blue shadows on Christmas snows, the orange sunsets of January, the gurgle of water under thawing ice in February, and the winds that tossed the branches of the pines in March; the first shrill songs of the tree toads in April, the meadows of bluebells in May, the fresh fields of rye and wheat well-sprung in June, and the hot, starry nights in July when the birds had grown silent—all the pageant of the year spread sights and sounds around him. Living always at the heart of nature, he could not fail to feel the beat of that great heart.



DOGWOOD