

PIONEER TRAILS

By Elsie (Vardaman) Corner

The little prairie schooner was all ready for the trip to Ohio. The pails, pots and pans for cooking over the camp fires were all in their places. The bedding and clothing was packed and the few dishes which they ate out of as they stood around the fire, were in the wagon ready to go. Ohio and then on to Iowa, and from there to Illinois, then on to Minnesota. This was the trail the family would make before homesteading the rich land of lakes and rivers.

They were very poor. The four children stood beside the wagon along with the sister of the husband and his mother. The wife was expecting and before the trip was finished one more little boy came to make his home on the trail. It was a hard life this pioneering, but they were very happy in their simple ways.

The Crams were not people who gave up easily at anything they set out to do. Lydia, the aunt of the children, had a lovable disposition and was very pretty with her large hazel eyes and light brown hair that curled in rings around her beautiful face. She was a great chum to her niece, Samantha. Many a secret was shared by the two. Samantha had large black eyes and black hair. Her creamy skin told of French blood which she inherited from her mother. The boys of the family were younger and they were stair steps. About two years between each one in age.

The sugar for the coffee and the lard for the frying pan was ready. The cow was tied behind the wagon. Away they went to the new frontiers.

At last, after long hours and days of travel, they found themselves in the land of lakes. Many a night they had killed wild game and cooked it by lantern light, eating the sourdough biscuits which they made and baked in the camp fire.

They built a home in the clearing of their homestead. They cut the logs and made the little log house they called the hold down and everyone worked from the oldest to the smallest. When the trees were felled they had to be trimmed and even the little boys could pick up the trimmings and pile them in a pile for the brush fire which might save their lives from wolves, which in that land of snows, ran in packs in winter of sometimes thirty or forty and when the snow covered over the little wild game and there was not even a rabbit to eat, the wolves were ravenous for food and would eat the horses or cows if they were not scared away by the fire.

Other people were building their hold downs and soon the little clean log houses were everywhere. They all had fire places and the smoke from the chimneys curled upward in the chilly air.

Then came the planting time and the gardens were put in and everyone was busy and happy. The log school houses were built by the united group and the ladies were cooking together and serving the goodies to their working men.

Fall came with its husking bees. The corn was piled in a pile on the ground and everyone of the young people would husk it. After awhile some lucky boy would find a red ear and then he could kiss the lady of his choice. Women would bake for a week, cooking the pies and cookies to be served. It was a gala event. Log raisings were the same, and the quilting bees. With all pulling together, the people soon built their barns, then the corn huskings were held in them.

They had their home made soap and beat their clothes on the rocks by the springs. Soft soap was used to wash their floors when they had any, as at first they only had dirt floors.

Young girls wrangled to dig Genseng roots and sell them to buy the calico for their party frocks which their mothers made for them on their fingers, as they had no sewing machines at that time. I understand the Chinese use the roots for medicine.

One day Samantha was digging roots when she heard excited voices and ran to see what it was. A body of men were passing. They all had their guns ready and went into hiding behind some bushes and rocks by the ford. The ford was a place filled with rocks over which the wagons or horses could go over the river. Samantha watched and two men came riding up on their mounts. The eyes of one seemed to pierce the underbrush and see anything that was hiding. Samantha felt his eyes looking right at her and froze in her tracks. The men in hiding were very afraid of these desperate men for they threw away their guns and ran. The two men on horse back rode on jesting and laughing, seemingly unafraid. She afterwards learned they were Frank and Jess James. It was not long until the Youngers were in prison after that.

Lydia and Samantha loved to gather cranberries. The lovely fruit which we always eat in the holidays. The cranberry marshes were full of snakes. The rattle snake is a gentleman. When his territory is invaded he will rattle his warning before he strikes. Woe unto the person who does not heed his rattle. Lydia and Samantha were very wary of the snakes and always wrapped their legs well before going into the marshes.

The rivers of Minnesota are crystal clear and the fish could be plainly seen. Sunfish, perch and mackerel were plentiful and no one need go hungry for fish.

The days of the hoop skirt and bustle came and the girls wanted to be in style so they gathered the small grape vines and scraped off the bark to make them smooth and these were used to run through the skirts to make them stand out in hoops.

All of the children learned to knit their mittens and their stockings. The older children would tap the maple trees for the sap to boil for the candies for their Christmas treats. They could stick a hole in an egg shell and blow out the egg into a bowl. Then they would wash the shell and pour in the syrup. When it would cool it would be hard. The shell would be taken off and it would be the candy. The home-made dolls with buttons for eyes along with the home-made whistles and reed guns were things of delight to the younger children.

One night they were at the log school house to a spelling bee and they saw a light on the snow. Running out they saw their log house burning to the ground. The neighbors took them

in for it was bitter cold and gave them some clothes and bedding to keep them warm until they could build another log house.

They were pitifully poor now and their father's poor fingers were often frozen as he split rails for money for clothes and food. Fences were all made of rails in those days.

There was plenty of game. Deer, wild turkey, prairie chickens and fish of all kinds. The lakes would freeze over and the snow would stay on the ground for months. The ice would be so thick that bobsled after bobsled could go over the lake in succession and it would not break.

It was nice by the fire at night after the work was done. There was one hour at bedtime that was called the hour of the children. Then they would pop corn or roast the hazel nuts in the ashes.

One time the father had a load of rails piled on his sled ready for the trip to town. On his return he would bring sugar, salt, coffee, and sometimes fag ends of meat. Those were the trimmings from the butcher shops of the town. They trimmed the hams and shoulders of the hogs and the beeves and sold them for soups and stew. They were a treat from the wild game and were more than welcome.

Travel was very slow in those days and towns were far apart. It took a day to go and come from town and then sometimes it was late at night when the father returned. Some had to drive oxen and they were indeed slow. Mr. Cram had a team of horses.

Early one morning he set out for town. Along about midnight the wild howling of a wolf pack was heard and looking out of the window they saw on the snow in the bright moonlight a large group of moving dots. As it drew nearer they saw it was the father in a mad rush for shelter from the wolves which were close behind him. Quickly the mother and the girls ran out and fired the brush pile. As the flames leaped higher and higher the father was able to come in home with his horses. He had fed the meat to them and kept alive. He said they would fight over it and kill each other and then eat each other in the snow. Needless to say they were glad to see him safe at home.

John Vardaman was a near neighbor. He was almost an addition to the family. He had been their neighbor in Indiana. He had always admired and been friends with the Crams. Samantha and her mother were more like sisters than a mother and her daughter. John had a homestead not too far from theirs and was a constant visitor in their home. Being a bachelor, he was always enjoying the good cooking of Mrs. Cram and the chance to see the beautiful Samantha and Lydia.

His father and mother had had twelve children and he had helped with all of his brothers and sisters care, not being able to go to school until he was grown. He had already learned the carpenters trade and was now a blacksmith.

Samantha took him for granted. He was like an uncle or an older brother. He often took her to singing class and she loved to hear him sing as he had a very sweet voice. His gentleness and strength of character made him an understanding companion.

Some new neighbors had come and taken a homestead not too far from the Crams. Immediately everyone wanted to help them with their log raising and a party was planned.

The Harrisons had only one son, Easom. He was very tall, dark and all of the young ladies loved to dance with him, for he was a smooth dancer. He could balance a glass of water on his head and dance and not spill a drop.

He soon saw Samantha. John could not help seeing how fascinated she was with handsome Easom. He also saw how Easom always asked her to dance with him more often than he did any of the other girls.

One bright golden day, when the sun was peeping into every nook and dell casting his wanton beams on every fir and cedar, Samantha was at the spring doing some washing. Lydia had been with her, but had gone back to the house for more soap, when John came up and as he saw they were alone he told her he loved her and wanted her to be his wife. Of course she was surprised at this as she had never thought of him in that way. He told her he always loved her and he had a nice homestead of his own to take her to, and would build more rooms on his house for her. She loved him very much and knew his worth as a man, but the thought of handsome Easom arose in her mind and she asked him to wait.

She told her parents about his proposal and they did not have anything to say to her. They said they knew the value of John, but she would have to answer her own heart.

One night when they thought she was asleep, she heard her father say, "John is too old for Samantha."

The new log barn of the Harrisons was done and a big party was to be held. Lydia and Samantha were all a-flutter. The new dresses were being made for the event. Samantha's was red and set off to advantage her brunette beauty, while Lydia's was a beautiful blue and she looked like a shy little wood-violet in it with her hazel eyes and brown curls.

Samantha tried hers on and was admiring its many tiers of ruffles and she suddenly whirled in the room, took a dance step or two, smiling into admiring eyes of Lydia and her mother, saying as she did so, "Don't I look like a red poppy?" There was a sound of steps outside the door, and in fear of who it might be, she ran into the next room and in her hurry she tore a hole in her beautiful dress. It was John. One quick glance and she saw his eyes light up with love and admiration as she closed the door and took off her dress. How was she to know that she would tear his heart that evening as she had torn her dress.

The evening was a gay one for her. She danced with both John and Easom and when he could get the chance to ask her for her hand in marriage, Easom told her how he loved her and she consented to be his wife. She was also asked to give her answer to James. (Did she mean John?) She told him she loved Easom and they were to be married. It hurt her tender heart to hurt him but one look in the black eyes of Easom and everything else was forgotten.

They were soon married. Easom was very poor and had no homestead as yet but they were young and she was used to privations, so a year flew by on golden wings.

Easom worked very hard and was often wet and cold. He loved his little family and tried very hard to make them happy. The baby boy with black hair and blue eyes was their delight. Little Albert was an adorable baby. His father was often gone splitting logs and doing anything he could to make an honest dollar. Easom grew thinner and thinner and when little Albert was a chubby youngster of five years of age, he grew ill with lung fever and died.

Samantha was stunned. Her whole world crumbled at her feet. She was buried beneath the ruins. Surely it was all a dream from which she would soon be awakened. It couldn't be true. But the still form of him whom she loved so dearly convinced her it was no dream. Their lives together had been one of struggle and privation, but the happy hours of companionship was worth it all. Now he was gone. It was all over.

Her father and John had sat up with Easom in his illness and now they made his casket. John also bought and paid for the marble slab at his grave. It still stands as a tribute to a great man and as loving memory to another.

On a cold raw day a weeping woman stood by an open grave and listened with a numb heart while they committed to the frozen earth one whose heart beats had been only for her.

Little Albert would not be comforted. He begged repeatedly, "Grandpa, please take my daddy out of that box." He watched in childish bewilderment everything that was done. His snubbing sobs tore into shreds her already broken heart.

Her mother and father took them home with them. Everything was done for her that loving hearts could do. She knew her dear old father was not able to keep anyone else. His poor old widowed mother was still living and she was a constant care to them both. She was too independent to take advantage of her parents, so she went to the city to find work.

She became a midwife. She would stay with women after their babies came and do their housework for them. Some were kind and some were not. Some were snobbish. Their husbands had money and they felt themselves above her. Some were pitiful. One lady had given birth to a deformity and while she was still in the valley of shadows, her husband had seen its little dead body so deformed and pitiful and thoughtlessly had given it away to the doctor to no doubt sell to some carnival or keep as a curiosity just as he chose, for he thought to spare her the sight of it.

Upon her return to consciousness she called for her child and it fell to Samantha to tell her of its fate. She broke the heart of the tenderhearted Samantha with her tears and wailings and at last sat in the quietness of a sorrow that had taken her mind.

Four years passed away in her struggle for existence. Albert was nine, a tall little boy with his father's face. His grandmother and grandfather were very good to him. They gave him everything they could and his mother was always doing all she could too. John was always coming and going with little gifts for them both.

One day he asked her, "Do you not think I have waited long enough?" He said, "Jacob waited fourteen years for Rachel, I have waited twenty-six for you, Samantha, is not that

enough?" Looking up into his tender eyes that had ever rested on her with love and kindness and from which many tears of loneliness had fallen, she gave him her answer and this time it was, "Yes."

Albert was always happy in their home. He loved John and wanted to call him father. His stepfather with his gentle smile said, "Call me John, I am not your father, Albert, I am your friend."

When they were married her father gave her a little money which he had saved for her from the sale of some things of her husband. She gave it to John. When Albert married, John gave him the money and then added another sum. "This was your father's and this is from your mother and me."

Once more they went pioneering. This time to Oklahoma. They chartered a box car of the train and her father came along. They bought out homestead rights and settled in the new land. Her children, she had five more, grew to manhood and womanhood in the new land.

John lived to a ripe old age and so did she. He passed away before her but he left her a life of joy to remember. She was never sorry she had married him. He was loved and respected by all who knew him.

Such were the lives of the pioneers. Lives of cleanliness and sacrifice. Lives of honest endeavor. Working together to leave for us a heritage far too precious, too dear to be taken lightly and thrown away. These honest people should be an inspiration to their children and their grand children to drive on to live lives that will give their children something to feel proud about and to talk of, even as we talk of the pioneers.

Every life should be so lived that those whose love they share can say, "That was a life built, not tore down, the fundamentals of our very country. That was a life."