27. Life of a Pioneer

Let's look now at what our pioneer ancestors' lives were like once they had settled onto their farms in New Vienna, Iowa. While we do not have first-hand accounts recorded from our own ancestors, we can find some excellent information about early pioneer life in New Vienna in *the book Roots and Wings*. Pioneer son John Bockenstedt wrote an article in 1915 for *The Iowa Homestead* recalling his memories of pioneer settlement:

Having so many neighbors that are worthy to mention for their sturdiness and stick-to-it-tiveness, I am in a position to give a good tradition as a descendent of the happy group that helped to develop one of the best farming sections in Iowa, the garden spot of Delaware county as it is sometimes called.

Viewing the location many times it seems to me that the pioneers were favorably inclined to settle near a stream and timber, as is here the case. They all live near the stream called Bear Creek, within a mile distant, that follows its course through the timber called Bear Grove, that derived its name on account of the Indians killing a bear in it in pioneer days. The stream traverses one of the most luxuriant and nutritious grazing sections in the state and the farming land is of a rich black loam that is productive as in pioneer days. The old Ft. Atkinson and Military road crossed the creek at the Bear Grove. My mother often told me many hundreds, even thousands, of Indians traveled that road in a body following it trail northwestward.

My mother was born in Ogles County, Ohio, in 1841 and came with her parents, Mr. and Mrs. F. Rohenkohl in a prairie schooner across Indiana and Illinois, crossing the Mississippi at Burlington, going north and founding the town of New Vienna in 1843. They started in May and arrived at New Vienna in August, where my mother is still living in the same township where she settled about seventy-two years ago, and at present owns our homestead a mile southwest of town in the same township.... My father often told me of those thrilling journeys to Dubuque, their market place, which was thirty miles from their home. They had to make this trip with ox teams. In the later 1850s+ the Illinois Central Railroad was built and the town of Dyersville was founded by James Dyer, only five miles from their home.

Mr. Rohenkohl kept the first store in New Vienna and the goods had to be hauled out from Dubuque with team and right here was real pioneer life. My grandmother often made the trip with her baby in her lap and the reins of the horses in her hands making the way at ten o'clock at night so I was told by different parties – certainly a venturesome act. No one would undertake it nowadays. Time went on and when grandfather Boeckenstedt had settled down he became fond of cattle, owning a lot of calves, they claiming the whole township for pasture. He often found them astray. It took him several days after wading through bush, swamps and tall prairie to recover them.

Mr. Bockenstedt goes on to talk about the different pioneer families who settled in the area and closed with these thoughts, "In memory of these early pioneers who now sleep in death, I am called upon to make this tradition, for I was personally acquainted with every one of them. I remember well how they toiled to bring the present fine farms into such a high state of cultivation."

John Meis, writing in the 1930s, recounted the following memories of his grandfather's stories on long winter evenings around the fire. His ancestors had built a log cabin in 1842 on a claim six miles from Iowa City.

My mother was a small child, as she had been born at the tavern in Ohio. Her new home was a log house that grandfather built. The shingles were clapboards to cover the roof. There were only two small windows, one on each side, and a door. The clapboards were made from blocks of wood three feet long, split into boards with an ax, the best tool the carpenter had at the time. There was a small sawmill nearby, which helped matters considerably and made possible the locking of the door. The door of the cabin had a long wooden latch on the end of which was a string passing through a hole in the door about six inches above the latch to open the door from the outside. In the evening the string was pulled in, and the door was locked for the night. The log cabin furniture consisted of a stove, table and a few chairs as well as a double bed. The regular bed was higher than those of today, to make room for a lower bed that was pushed under the bed in the daytime to get it out of the way. The sides of the bed were rolls, with knobs in the end parts. Wire was passed back and forth from the knobs for a spring.

The farm implements of the time were a plow, harrow, scythe, cradle and flail. The plow was a wooden mulboard and the harrow was homemade, and there was a double shovel cultivator. All of these implements were used to sow grain by hand. Grandfather sowed the grain by hand and grandmother would drive the horses hitched to a harrow. When the grain was ripe, grandfather cut it with a cradle and grandmother would bind it into bundles to dry. Grandfather would then thresh the grain from the heads with a flail.

Nor were there corn planters at that time. A homemade marker was used to make the rows, the field being crossed two ways to make a cross for the planting. The children dropped the corn and the grownups followed with a hoe to cover it – a procedure I can remember very clearly, for I dropped many a kernel of corn into our fertile Iowa soil as a small boy. Grandmother's tedious work of binding the grain into bundles and grandfather's arduous job of threshing it with a flail was poorly paid, for prices were very low, so the pioneers had to be very thrifty and clever managers to make a living. All the farmers raised sheep for their wool, which was made into clothing and stockings by the women-folk of the household, though they didn't need stockings in summer, when the Vorwald children went barefoot. Grandfather made wooden shoes as best he could for the children during the winter.

Mr. Meis goes on to talk about those early days, how the family's primary meat in winter was venison, which was plentiful and easy to get in the winter by the use of a stand of winter wheat close to the house; how an "ever-present and real menace to life and property" were rattlesnakes. Then he recounts how grandfather Vorwald sold the homestead in Johnson County in 1845 and moved to New Vienna because of the prosperity of that community and the relatives he had there. A few years earlier some German families from Cincinnati had settled in New Vienna and found a stream large enough to be dammed up for power for mills.

Henry Schemmel soon had his woolen mills under way; the Fangmann family started a small flour mill; Hellmans operated a sawmill; and the Krapfls opened a brewery. The power for these enterprises was furnished by Coffee Creek (the name was later changed to the North Fork of the Maquoketa, and the small stream further west was named Coffee Creek.) Dams on the creek

forced the water to pass over water wheels, the weight of the water being used to drive the machinery.

Rohenkohls ran a small store to provide for the simple needs of the people. There was no canned fruit or foods then or fresh vegetables, nor were there ready-made shoes or ready-made clothing. The shoemakers made all the shoes of leather, while the homemade ones were of wood, and the tailor fashioned the Sunday wear for the men. Dressmakers made the Sunday clothes for the ladies, while the ladies themselves made the everyday things out of flannel, denim, or muslin for their entire families. Bachelors, thus, were in pretty much of a quandary to get work clothes and often married just to have that problem solved. Shoes were an easier matter to procure, for it was not long before ready-made footwear was on the market.

Anna Deppe Bruggeman wrote in 1937 at the age of 68 about her memories of her parents' pioneer experiences and her childhood in New Vienna.

I will now start to write a little I know about my grandparents my mother told me. They came from Oldenberg, Germany around the year 1846 when there were only four families at New Vienna. They came by a sail ship over the ocean and it took them some 50 days or more. They sailed to New Orleans. Then came up the Mississippi as far as Dubuque, and then to New Vienna by ox team if I am not mistaken. They were with three families when they came, four were there, so they were with seven families in all, with time go on, there were still more coming. There were trees and little rivers or creeks, so they to settle at New Vienna they had wood to burn and water to drink. My grandparents with their five small children lived in a log cabin on the very same place where Overmans live now. I think Frank Overman is still living there, of course, everyone first had to grub trees down and build their one-room log cabin where they lived with their family. Then, worst of all, my grandfather died after a year after they had been here and my grandmother with her five small children had to work hard earning 25 cents a day, also her children some of them had to work out, even my mother some seven years old, had to take care of some other family children. When my grandfather died they took him with an ox team to the cemetery, when I am right he was the third person in the New Vienna cemetery. They had no priest, no church. After a time they built a small log cabin, or church, and people came together every Sunday to worship our Lord. Prayed together and a Mr. Fangman read the Gospel and different prayers, and after they went home – happy and contented, good God-fearing people, and great was their faith, always trusted in God. They had to go through hardships very much. Dubuque was their nearest trading place.

After they grubbed out some trees a little patch and raised a very small crop, no machine for thrashing, mowed it with a scythe, and the oxen tramped out the kernels. They let the wind blow it clean, that was their farming. Will go to Dubuque to have it ground, sometimes they used a coffee mill to have ground a little when still more settlers arrived. Then at last the Bishop see to it that they had a steady priest, after years my grandmother bought some land, at that time land was very cheap and her son Henry married Minna Hinners where she made today 28 years ago. My father died 80 years old. He came from Faderborn, Germany when some 24 years old, as a young man coming to New Vienna around 1850, worked for a time at the sawmill at Mr. Roehenkohl at New Vienna, he always like to work for them. They always were nice to him, when before he had worked on different places. One time he took so sick with a fever, laid for 26 weeks in a little shack all alone, so often wished for a drink of fresh water if somebody only gave it to him, nothing but wounds on his body from laying all that long time, when Roehenkohls found out about it, they took him to their home and took care of him, then he got well again and afterward worked for them. . .

but if we think of people in the old country, when they grew up, children had to go to see a different country to make a living. That was goodbye for this world not to see them again. O how they must have felt about it, it was not very often that anyone ever got back to see them again. It was too far the ocean between, and they had to work hard to earn a little.

I think if I am right, it was on April 25, 1857, the wedding of my parents William Deppe and Bernadine Schroeder settle on the farm where they lived, after my brother, John Deppe and family lived, and at present Clem Deppe and family lives. Talk about farm that time had they only money, but very little. This is what I know about it. They paid $1.25 an acre. Prairie land, hazel brush and high slough grass, no house, no fence, no nothing at all, first thing in the timber quite a ways to go they made some logs to build a one-room log cabin, and with a yoke of oxen they broke up a few acres of prairie where they planted of course, by hand, potatoes, a little corn, kept it clean by a hoe, and again chopped fence rails in the far timber to have a little to burn and make a little stretch of fence with time move, it took a long years to have the prairie broke and fence all around the 160 acre farm, that time they did not know nothing about Prairie, after they had a cow or a few, they run all over first with a cow bell so they could hear them, after they got closer to them mother got them already as far as Tom Davis place, in the evening that is where the Scherbrings, Joe and Fritz live quite a way but after years they had the whole farm fenced, hard work.

My father and mother's brother stayed sometimes in the timber chopping post rails and firewood for a whole week, took some eats and stuff along, slept under a big hang over cliff in the wagon box, that was their bed at night with the wolves howling around them. The timber was some ten miles from home. Mother was then all alone in the house, their little log cabin in the prairie, here and there a family living as people first settled around New Vienna. Petersburg was not there then. The people first thought nobody could live there in the vast prairie, only brushes and slough grass and prairie fires that time was very serious.

Father and mother worked hard breaking prairie, making fences, hoeing corn a few acres first, on Sunday and Holy Days they had to walk to church to New Vienna some five miles away. Wordehofs and some still further had to walk. The time to come, more settle in the prairie they decided to build a church so they would not have to go so far anymore, but did not know the right spot where to build, at last finely they decided to build. The first church, on the very same place where our new church stands at present, a Mr. Peter Domeyer lived on the spot where now Mrs. Elizabeth Morman lives at present, that is why this place is Petersburg, was called after Peter Domeyer. The Catholic church of Petersburg has its beginning in March 1867.

During 1867 Petersburg had grown from a little hamlet to a village with a store, a saloon, a country store, and in 1868 a blacksmith shop and wagon-maker shop. "With these improvements, Petersburg became a trading center for the farmers of Bremen Township…" And therefore a church should be built.

Mrs. Bruggeman writes for some time about the building of the church in Petersburg, from the selection of a site to the donation of land, getting the approval of the Bishop, engaging the priest to help raise funds, the drawing of plans, hauling of rock from the Goedken farm, and of lumber from Guttenberg, "quite a trip by wagon", selecting the parishioners to do the work of carpentry, masonry, plastering, securing donations for windows and altars. She talked about building a house for the priests and building a new school. Up until 1888 there had been only a one-room schoolhouse. Then Mrs. Bruggeman writes about daily life:

There could be a whole book to be written by some people that can do it better than I can, but people sure all went through many hardships years ago, but we are more contented at home and work, did not get to town very often, except after they had churned their butter and then had to carry it to town traded it on a little sugar, coffee and calico to get a new dress, once in a while my mother already carried eggs and butter to Dyersville the first years, walked the short cut all through fields, then there were not many fences to climb, when walking to New Vienna to church they had to pass Bear Creek and Coffee Creek just west of New Vienna at that time the bridges were only a few boards of wood just laid on the ground from one edge to the other side, not much wider than a lumber wagon, was very much dangerous to drive over, after years when we drove with horses and by some rain they drove away by the water after heavy rains. I remember so well when we were small, my mother had to be sponsor at one of her sisters, they had a little girl, when we got to Bear Creek, Bear Grove, that little bridge laid on side of the fence so we had to get off the wagon and father drove through the water with the team and the wagon. He got through alright, horses and wagon, sure went in deep and we walked over the bridge that hung on one side of the fence, good old times after years when people raised more hogs, some 40 or 50. They, of course, always had to be butchered before they could sell them. Then the neighbors, men and women all came to help. They left them out overnight to get frozen. The next morning father took them, father, sometimes had to take them by team to Dubuque at a price of only $2.25 cents a hundred, a 300-pound hog would bring only $6.75. When time came we children had to go to school, we had to walk only one mile, only all little white schoolhouses. Petersburg little white schoolhouse was at the same spot where now the Sisters' house is and where they live. The school we had to go is still standing and I hope they leave it stand for a long time yet to come. It is always a remembrance. To me it stands adjoining the place where my dear youngest sister, Mary Deppe Koopman died. She died November 9, 1901.

This is a photo of Anna Deppe Bruggeman and her husband John Bruggeman with some of their children. Mrs. Bruggeman finishes her stories with reminiscences about her family.

"And about wages, that time when my mother was some 15 years old, she worked out for $17.00 a whole year, also worked outside as well as in the house, help with the housework. Mother said in those early days often a tribe of Indians came through, as many as 200 at a time, quite a bunch, something for them to see. My grandfather and grandmother were very poor people so they came from the old country to the United States, and my grandfather soon died after a year. No place for us to stay here on this world, only a Valley of Tears, all it is one has to go young, the other old, but we hope for a better to come, wish I could write more about, forgot a lot and I am not so young. Mother."

Other pioneer stories recounted in *Roots and Wings* tell us about how the pioneers had to clear the land, cut logs, carry them by hand and horse and oxen to the home site, break up the prairie and plow it to make it ready to plant seeds. "There were no lumber wagons." "Joseph Fangman owned the first horse in New Vienna and the first buggy in 1866, which he used for transportation of farm

products." Farmers who had only one horse to work an 80-acre farm often used the horse with a neighbor in order to make a team.

There are stories about raising hogs, butchering hogs, losing cattle to sneaky butchers, raising sheep, the ubiquitous presence of the spinning wheel in the home. "In the homes, the spinning wheel was the only mechanical contrivance to lessen labor, and that was in almost constant use, for the sheep wool on each farm was utilized in making clothes. The stockings that were knitted by the women were of wool. It was a harder task to do housework then, surely, for one could not even stop for coffee in the middle of the afternoon, since both that commodity and sugar were very precious articles and a great luxury." "Men all wore boots, which were very convenient during prohibition time when the shafts of boots were often used to hide a bottle, hence the expression 'bootlegging.' There were no overshoes or rubber boots, but an article of footwear worth remarking from that period was a type of boot made from buffalo hide with the fur turned in called, 'buffalo boots.'"

Here are more comments and stories from *Roots and Wings* and from Cousin Fred and the *Henry F. Klas Family Calendar*:

"Sulphured two gallons of apples. This was a method of preserving apples. A Sulphur compound was sprinkled on hot coals in the smokehouse. The fumes produced preserved the apple slices which had been placed on a cheese cloth stretched over the coals. The apple slices were then placed in crocks for storage. In later years they used a burning Sulphur candle instead of the Sulphur compound."

"Canned seven quarts of chicken. These were hens that were culled because they were no longer laying well. They fried the chickens and canned them in some of the broth, using a wrench-like device to tighten the zinc jar lids and seal them. The chicken was "re-fried" when prepared for dinner. They de-boned the necks and wings and canned the meat for soup."

"The feather beds were two sheets of flannel stuffed with feathers and were used as top comforters in winter. The feathers moved around and had to be re-distributed."

"The washing machine was powered by the gasoline engine on the water pump in the pump house. The first washing machine was a wooden one, with a "clamp on" ringer with a hand crank. The second had the wringer attached to the machine with the wringer powered by the pump engine."

They bought a mill to grind oats for the cattle. Before this they took the oats to town for grinding into grist. With their "women horsepower" as Leona describes it, they backed the wagon into the barn under a chute from the oats pen using the double doors in the stanchion area because the team of horses had a hard time backing the wagon over the step and sill into the barn. They hooked up the team of horses to pull the loaded wagon out of the barn and haul it to town. They took feed sacks along to the mill and the ground oats (grist) was put into the sacks so it could be stored in the barn. It was easier to handle the grist in sacks than haul it on an open wagon and shovel it into the barn. The sacks with grist were stored in the SE corner of the barn until the grist was fed. The new mill was located in the south end of the barn just east of the center aisle and below a chute from the oats bin, so the oats could flow by gravity into the mill. The grist, which came out of the bottom of the mill, could then be shoveled into two storage tanks in the barn. They did shovel some grist for making swill for the hogs into sacks and stored these sacks in the corncrib, closer to the slop barrel. The mill was powered by the tractor using a belt that extended through the center door on the south side of the barn. The mill is an example of how the tractor reduced the human labor

needed on the farm. They picked corn by hand but did not use the tractor to pull the wagon. The horses were trained to go forward and stop on an oral command, so the pickers walked along the wagon and commanded the horses to move the wagon forward when it was time. Something they could not do with a tractor. Also, they did not use the tractor much in winter other than to grind feed. The horses probably could get through the snow better than the early tractors.

There was a wooden wagon box that fit on the sled runners to make a horse-drawn sleigh for winter. Each spring they threw out the old cornstraw in the ticks/mattresses and put in new cornstraw picked from the fields the previous fall. Each fall they saved their best corn for seed corn for the coming year. After the manure pile thawed in the late spring, it was loaded onto the spreader by hand with forks and then pulled out into the fields to be spread on the soil.

After the oats was cut with the binder and tied into bundles, they stacked the bundles into "shocks" to keep the grain heads of oats off the land for drying until threshing. Sometimes the wind with a rainstorm soon after shocking would blow the shocks over if the shocks weren't "settled" into the land, so they would have to reset the shocks or "re-shock". Threshing went from farm to farm in July.

"The original log cabins were usually one room buildings, about 16 by 20 feet, plastered out with clay." The occasional two-story house had no indoor stairs, and access to the upper story was reached by an outdoor ladder attached to the house, which happy circumstance allowed 'French Leave' to teenagers wanting to escape strict parental supervision to join comrades for parties and dancing. "In simplicity, the furniture of the downstairs matched the rest of our house and life. There was a cook stove that kept us boys busy carrying in wood so our mother could keep our many mouths fed. In the winter, we loved to see the top of the stove glow almost red as we came in to warm our cold hands. Besides the stove, there was a homemade table and cupboard, and the usual large bed under which a smaller bed was kept in the daytime. In this house, we spent much of our childhood."

Early efforts to get farm products to market were labor-intensive. "New Vienna was 30 miles from Dubuque, so that a trip there to sell grain, livestock, or any produce they had then was quite an event. Ox teams and homemade wagons were used for the hauling, since neither cattle nor horses were very large at the time, nor were there very many of them. There were no high-grade stallions, for there were only common horses, weighing about 1200 pounds, and used for farm work. Indeed, there were no thoroughbreds in either the horse, cattle, or hog line, for the farmers exchanged their many-blooded stock for breeding purposes, resulting in very different looking creatures than we see on most farms now. Since Dubuque was on the Mississippi River, the farm stuff had to be taken to Dubuque, as the river was the only means of transportation at the time. Each trip was a long, arduous adventure and took place thus: A number of farmers always banded together for the event, starting at 3:00 a.m. They would travel all day and camp that night, arriving in Dubuque the following day to do their business. They started home the same day, camped again that night, and would get home on the third night. The hill on which they camped was called 'Pancake Hill', after what those hardy men ate there. They had little money to spend because they didn't have much to sell, and what they did sell brought very low prices. They received cash only in summer when the river was navigable. In the winter, when the river was frozen, they had to accept articles in trade from the store. The trade were good means of livelihood, however. For instance, the shoemaker

continued to make a large proportion of the fine boots and shoes even after the 'store' footwear became common, and even then the men still preferred the shoemaker's boots for all-around wear. The village wagon maker made the spring wagons, plows and harrows, and the carpenter was responsible for furniture. He later had a fancier title if he went in for making furniture exclusively, for he was titled a 'cabinet maker'. He also had the not-enviable task of taking one's measurement after one's death and then using those measurements to make one's coffin, so that he had charge of our furniture, living and dead."

In those days, as today, men did not always continue in one enterprise or trade for a lifetime. For example: "Sigmond Schaetzle, born in Baden, Germany, came to America in 1852 and after stopping at Cincinnati, went to Dubuque from where he came to New Vienna in 1854. Being a weaver by trade, he found employment in the Schemmel woolen mills. After the early deaths of three of the Schemmel brothers, Sigmond assumed charge of the woolen mills. And established a good trade. In 1860 he sold the woolen mill and bought the Washington House Hotel and Saloon in New Vienna that had been built in 1854 by Mr. Ramm. Sigmond successfully operated the business until 1868 and then moved to Plum creek west of Dyersville, where he ran a flouring or grist mill until about 1885, when he returned to New Vienna and was a clerk for Mr. Jacob Kerper and also for Wm Brunsmann. He retired about 1895 and died in 1901 at the age of 76 years."

The enterprising spirit of the pioneers sometimes strayed into the realms of the unlawful. "During the Civil War, the Government was in urgent need of horses and paid unusually high prices for them, which created another 'racket' for the less law-abiding of the community - horse stealing. The various bands all over the country worked together so cleverly that their capture was difficult. Jackson County, along the Mississippi River, with its convenient hills and bluffs, as well as Council Bluffs, were favorite hideouts for horse thieves. However, public opinion soon became so strong against them that a vigilance committee was organized to put a stop to the new crime wave, and Judge Lynch told this committee that whenever they caught a man or men stealing a horse or found someone in possession of stolen horses, they should hang the person or persons guilty, to the nearest trees. They followed these directions, and soon the trees were ornamented with horse thieves, which gruesome spectacle 'lynching' made horse-stealing increasingly rare."

Throughout all these stories runs that ubiquitous thread of momentum that defines the pioneer spirit: progress, whether in tools, materials, methods, machines, commodities, or transportation. About 1860 a railroad was built from Dubuque to Sioux City, Iowa. At a point on the railroad 30 miles west of Dubuque, the town of Dyersville was begun. "Through this railroad, the pioneers of New Vienna were given a market, and prosperity began its cheerful march down the rich, fertile fields, beautifully free of debt."