

## L. D. Sims

My reminiscences of early settlers have been confined principally to those of the town, but there were many, after severe trials, privations and struggles, became prominent in public affairs, and aided largely in advancing the public good, who did not live in the town.

A notable example of the hardships of pioneer life was that of L. D. Sims, who came in a wagon with his family from Ohio, arriving in October, 1848, and went to work for Peter Newcomer, on his farm, about two and a half miles down Des Moines River. There was a small building used for a workshop on rainy days, in which he placed his family, his household goods, consisting of a pine box for a table, wooden benches for chairs, and a shakedown bed. He received fifty cents a day for his labor, husking corn and doing odd jobs about the place.

In December following his arrival, Sims took a farm on shares, his portion being one-half the product of ten acres of corn. The Winter was severe, the snow about three feet deep, and many hardships were endured by himself and family. Few luxuries were had in the home, or on the table, but wild game was abundant, deer and wild turkey often adding to the supply.

Early in the Spring of 1849, he began work in earnest, but one morning when hitching his team for plowing, one horse suddenly sickened and died. Despite the delay, with the kindly loan of neighbors' horses, he planted twenty-six acres of corn, sixteen of which was known as sod corn, and five acres of wheat. In the Fall, he cut the wheat with a cradle, the first one used in the county.

In August, his other horse was killed by lightning. He invested thirty-five dollars, all the money he had, in a yoke of oxen, gathered his corn crop of one hundred and fifty bushels, and sold it to Alex. Bowers for twenty-five cents a bushel, with which he purchased the much-needed clothing for himself and family.

In the Fall of 1849, he made a claim in Bloomfield Township, and, with the aid of his wife, built a log cabin, minus floor, doors, chimney, and chinking between the logs, into which, in February following, he moved. To keep the snow from blowing in on the beds at night, the wagon cover was hung on the wall, and sometimes the wagon box placed over the children's bed on the floor. So intense was the cold, the family remained in bed on several days to keep from freezing.

The next season, he planted sixteen acres of corn, cut and split rails to fence thirty acres, worked out a month for fifty cents a day, walking seven miles morning and evening to and from his work.

In 1856, on the site of his first cabin, he built a hewed log house with four rooms, doing all the work except making the doors. In the Fall, he sold the farm, and resolved to go to Kansas. He spent the Winter seeking a location, but his wife so seriously objected to leaving Iowa that he abandoned the project. In August, she passed to her eternal rest, leaving him with eight children. Soon after, he purchased a wild, uncultivated tract in what is now Grant Township, carved out of Lee Township, adjoining the eastern part of the city, and began again, with his children, to make a home, a task the present generation know little or nothing of. The fortitude, pluck and energy which had overcome obstacles before which most men would have quailed, was still inherent within him, and, beginning with the breaking plow, he soon had under way valuable permanent improvements.

The old breaking plow was one of the most prominent factors in promoting Western civilization. It was often ungainly, uncouth, and roughly fashioned, but it served its purpose. In the very early settlements, there were usually mechanics who had not forgotten their trades, and, joined together, they could construct a plow, adapted to the purpose. The beam was usually about ten feet long, fashioned from the very toughest timber. Near the front end were two small wheels, one about four inches larger than the other, to run in the furrow, the smaller one running on the sod, thus keeping the plow level with the ground. A long lever reaching from the front end of the beam to the plow holder was used to fix the depth of the furrow

by raising or lowering the lever, and, by dropping it to the beam, the plow could be thrown entirely out of the ground. The mould-board was made of wood, on which thin strips of steel were fastened by a blacksmith, and so shaped as to turn the sod over flatwise. Attached to the board was the share, made from good steel, with one edge and a point sharpened to a keen cutting edge, to cut the tough, fibrous mass of roots of grass and weeds, and often roots of shrubs and grubs, which had been killed by prairie fires. Fastened to the beam vertically, and extended to the point of the share, was a coulter, as it was called, made of the best steel, the lower six inches sharpened to a keen edge to rip the turf above the point.

The plow being ready, a string of three to six yoke of oxen would be hitched to it, and with slow plodding pace a strip of soil twenty to thirty inches wide would be turned over to the sun's rays.

In the rush of the first settlements, there was a scarcity of breaking plows. The first effort of settlers was to get a crop of corn and wheat, and it was the custom to help each other by loaning their oxen, and have the plow take turns in the settlement. If the newcomer arrived early in the Spring and got a tract broken up in April, he would go into the field, and, following each second or third furrow, with an axe make a deep cut in the turf, into which a small boy or girl, often the wife and mother, would drop a few kernels of corn and give it a stamp of the foot. There was no further cultivation, and the resultant crop was known as sod corn, a great boon to many of the pioneers. There are many of the present generation living in luxury who, as boys, have vivid memories of bread made from sod corn, not even ground into meal.

The old breaking plow has gone, and with it the sod house, the log cabin, the trials of pioneer life, the common humanity, generous hospitality, the helpfulness of one another, the unity of thought and purpose, but they left an heritage on which has been built a civic community second to none on earth.

In due time, Sims developed his farm to one of the best in the county, and surrounded himself with all the means to enjoy the reward of his toil and settle down to a quiet old age. His uprightness of character so won

public esteem, he was often called to public office. He took great interest in public schools, and was the projector and most liberal contributor for building the first schoolhouse in Grant Park. For many years, he was the leading member of the School Board. His purse was always open to help public improvements. When the fund was being raised by citizens of the city to purchase ground for the State Fair, he gave one thousand dollars.

Politically, he was raised under the tutelage of the Democratic party, but he opposed its Free Trade policy, and cast his first vote for "Tippecanoe and Tyler, too," and remained a Republican, but in local affairs he was independent. In 1847, he evidenced his patriotism by enlisting in the Fourth Ohio Infantry, for the Mexican War, went to Vera Cruz, where he was stricken with Yellow Fever, and, after partial convalescence, was honorably discharged for disability. In the Civil War, he served as wagon master in the Fourth Iowa Infantry.

Socially, he was genial, courteous, a kind neighbor, popular and influential in social affairs of the community. He was a prominent member of the Odd Fellows' fraternity. He died in 1895.

October First, 1905.

**Transcribed from:**  
**PIONEERS OF POLK COUNTY, IOWA AND REMINISCENCES OF EARLY DAYS**  
**by L. F. Andrews**  
**Volume II**  
**Des Moines**  
**Baker-Trisler Company**  
**1908**