ELIJAH CANFIELD

One of the pioneers of Polk County who impressed his personality upon its civic affairs was Elijah Canfield. A Pennsylvanian by birth, he came here in 1845, and located a farm on the wild, wide prairie in Democrat Township. In 1848, the name was changed to Camp Township, which then embraced nearly the whole of the eastern part of the county. The only saw mill in the county was Parmelee's, ten miles down the river, and lumber was scarce. He built a log cabin sixteen feet square, with a rude fireplace at one end, constructed of stones gathered in the neighborhood, and a chimney of sticks, the whole plastered with mud clay from the land. Greased paper was used for the windows instead of glass, old boxes for tables and shelving.

The first settlements in the new country were made along the rivers, to get the benefit of timber belts skirting them for logs for lumber, fence rails, and fuel, hence it is the principal cities and towns to-day are along rivers. The prairie settler was therefore deprived of those accessories, added to which was the isolation, his nearest neighbor often being miles away.

With energy and faith in the future, Canfield began to turn up the soil and build a home—-he was a home-builder of the true type. So soon as he had completed his cabin, he started a church, and organized the first class of the Methodist Church in that township. So soon as the church was started, Canfield organized a School District, the first in the township.

In 1847, he removed to Four Mile Township, and during the Fall, built the first schoolhouse in that township. It was 16 x 24 feet, a rude affair, but it served the purpose. Each settler furnished their pro rata number of logs for it. Benches, desks, and tables were improvised from the native timber. A teacher was employed by voluntary subscriptions, there being no organized school districts.

Canfield was greatly troubled by wolves, the timber being full of them. They had a hankering for his pigs and calves, and so frightened his children, they hardly ventured to go to school. There was one large, wild-eyed ferocious brute which became especially annoying, and one moonlight evening he discovered it cautiously approaching a pile of straw in which the pigs were sleeping. Taking his shotgun, he stealthily got within a few paces of the thief, so intent upon its quest for pork it did not heed the coming danger. There was a puff and a bang, and the pest of the settlement was put out of business.

In 1846, the turning up of the prairie soil released the miasma therein, and Fever and Ague was epidemic. There were not enough well persons to care for the sick. It was not uncommon for the doctor who visited families to be taken with chills and have to go to bed with the sick until the paroxysm passed away. To see a strong, robust man shaking so violently as to make the floor tremble—and the experience repeated until he became a physical wreck—was a familiar picture to many of the pioneers.

There were also other menaces to the peace and comfort of the early settlers. Skunks destroyed their poultry, rabbits killed their young fruit trees by gnawing the bark and tender roots, rattlesnakes were so numerous as to make it unsafe to hunt cattle through the tall grass without a club or some weapon for defense. An old-timer relates that he stopped over night once with a couple of bachelors who had taken a claim on the prairie. They prepared a good supper, but he noticed that they ate nothing, and asked if they were sick. "No," was the reply, "but we killed two hundred and twenty-five rattlesnakes this afternoon, and the smell of them rather upset our appetites."

Corn meal and flour in those days were the most frequent source of deprivation. Of meat, bacon was the staple, but the timber and groves abounded with deer, turkeys, and wild pigeons; the streams with fish, the prairies with quail and chickens. As late as 1855, Robert Powers drove into Dubuque, in February, with one thousand prairie chickens, one thousand quail, one thousand rabbits, eight deer, five wolves, and two bears. It was not uncommon for settlers to shoot game from their cabin doors. The prairie chicken is nearly extinct.

"They have scattered from the meadow,
They drum no more—
Those splendid Spring-time pickets!
The sweep of the share and sickle has thrust them from the hills.
They have scattered from the meadow
Like the partridge in the thickets;
They have perished from the sportsman who kills, and kills, and kills."

At certain seasons, the wild, or passenger, pigeons made their appearance in flocks of millions, breaking down trees on which they roosted while making a stop to get food. They have now become extinct in this state. The last flight was in the Spring of 1868. There were lines of them stretching out on the skyline as far as the eye could reach, and lasting for several days. Not only have animals and birds succumbed to Civilization, but some of our trees. I do not refer to those used for lumber or building. All over the city, where lots have been improved by grading, cutting, and digging, you will find the dead and dying Black Oak.

In 1847, John D. Parmelee, who had started a mill about ten miles down the river, to saw lumber for the barrack buildings at The Fort, added machinery to grind corn. Canfield was there when it started, and saw the first bushel of grain ground in Polk County. A year later, stone buhrs were added to grind wheat, but there was no bolting machinery, and the farmer's wife had to do the bolting at home.

In 1850, Canfield sold his farm and took another new one in Clay Township, then a part of Beaver Township, where he established a home which became one of the finest in the county, and where he passed the remainder of his days. On the farm is the oldest orchard in the county. As elsewhere, his first work in the township was to organize a church and a School District. He was intensely public-spirited and active in civic affairs in the township and county. A man of good, common sense and judgment, business capacity, and strict integrity, he logically became the choice of the township for places of trust, hence he was repeatedly elected Justice of the Peace, Township Assessor, and Treasurer—in fact, he held some public office

continually after coming to the county, not because he wanted them, but the people would not let him refuse. His public duties brought him so frequently to Des Moines, he became a familiar personage, and well known to everybody.

Politically, he was a Whig, but not an active partisan. His neighbors and townsmen waived his politics, however. Had he been a Democrat, he could have had some of the best offices in the county, for he was very popular, but in those days the Democrats did not believe a Whig had any right to hold a public office, and Barlow Granger and his confederates made it certain during the first decade that they did not get any. The devices and schemes to that end were at least peculiar, if not suspicious. If the contest was close or doubtful, a laggard poll list from a way-back precinct would come in, be counted and settle the majority.

Socially, Canfield was genial, hospitable, and of kindly temperament. His home was always the resort of old settlers, where they found warm hearts and generous welcome. He was a highly esteemed member of the Pioneer Settlers' Association. His nobility of character, purity of aspirations, cleanliness of life, devotion to country, and obedience to God, made him a man in the true sense of the word, and of inestimable value during the formative period of county affairs.

March Fourth, 1906.

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