

LEWIS M. BURKE

A visitor traversing Polk County to-day and seeing the splendid farms, with their luxurious environments, would have little conception of the trials and deprivations endured by the pioneers, who took them from the hand of Nature and made them what they are. One of the hard-luck pioneers was Lewis M. Burke.

He was born in 1797, in Maryland, and in 1802, his parents moved to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where he grew to manhood, and acquired the best education afforded in the common schools of that period and location. When a youth, he learned the milling trade with Joseph Mentz, and remained with him until he was twenty-one years old. He then went to wagoning on the turnpike, and stage driving, which he followed fifteen years. In 1833, he removed to Wheeling, West Virginia, where he again engaged in stage driving and farming. In 1834, he removed to Adams County, Illinois; in April, 1846, came to Polk County, and made a claim on what is now Section Thirty-three, in Beaver Township, then called Camp Township. The Indians had left the country in October prior, and there were but a few white people in the county. The Government had not surveyed the county; there were no metes and bounds. Each new-comer selected his desired location, paced it off, and stuck stakes for the corners, or blazed trees, to mark his claim. That was all the title he had, all he could get, but it was respected and held inviolate by all other settlers.

He built a log cabin, 12 x 16, near Mud Creek, in a timber grove, which still bears his name. In the cabin was housed fourteen persons, the furniture and dogs, the latter a very useful and necessary concomitant of pioneering. Mrs. Burke once said they were a little crowded; there was but one bedstead, on which was piled all the beds during the day, and under it was crowded

trunks, baskets, bags and bundles. The walls were hung with coats, cloaks, shawls, dresses and household utensils. On a long board shelf stood a mirror, clock and candlesticks. At night, the beds were made on the floor, the one table and chairs set outdoors. A large fireplace occupied most of one side, and furnished heat for cooking in pots, kettles and skillets, meals not such as would tempt an epicure, but which gave the most healthful nourishment for a people driven to hardships and exposure—meals that had no dyspepsia in them. Around the big fireplace the sovereign lords of the household stretched their pedal extremities while they indulged in the luxury of a corncob pipe and discussed the prospects of the crops and the doings at The Fort.

The country was wild, unsettled, and Burke had hard sledding. If flour and corn meal got short, Oskaloosa was the nearest milling point to get a supply, requiring an absence from home of several days, while wolves and rattlesnakes were abundant to terrorize the wife and twelve children.

During 1847-1848, money was scarce. He kept a diary in which he made a record of many of his trials and deprivations. In October, it says: "Have no shoes; am going barefoot, so are the children; no money to buy shoes." In another place: "Meat and meal all out. Swapped a bushel of buckwheat, for a pound of salt." He was not so much troubled about the meat, for wild turkeys, prairie chickens and elk were numerous. His diary says: "This morning saw fifty elk foraging on the buckwheat patch." A man named Ballard was hired to haul com to the garrison at The Fort, to be paid every alternate load as compensation for the hauling.

In 1848, claim-jumpers and land sharks were harrassing (sic) the squatters, as the settlers were called, necessitating some measures for protecting their rights. In each township was selected a Vigilance Committee for that purpose, and Burke was selected for his township. A claim-jumper or land speculator was to be treated like a highway robber if found tramping over the county, and several so found it to be.

In 1849, Burke made an entry of his claim, paid one dollar and twenty-five cents per acre to the United States Land Office for it, and in 1852,

received a Government patent. He improved it, erected fine buildings, and made it a home of profit and content for himself and children for thirty-four years, but, unfortunately, it lay at the extreme eastern limit of the land grant made by the Government to the River Improvement and Navigation Company, who, deeming it a good thing, claimed it, dispossessed him, and turned him out in his old age to begin over again, with no recourse from the Government for the blunders of its own agents, who had taken his money and given him a pretended title. And therein lies a general misunderstanding respecting a Government certificate for land. It conveys no absolute title. It is simply a certificate that a certain amount of money has been paid for a certain tract of land, named therein. It was not uncommon that two persons held a patent for the same tract, thus involving a lot of trouble, delay, and often litigation, to get the matter settled. In the Burke case, the State of Iowa was most shamefully derelict in its dealings with the River Improvement Company, by which not only were settlers robbed of their homes, but itself most outrageously swindled.

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