Reminiscences of a Pioneer in the Rock River Country

By Edwin Delos Coe

My father left his old home in Oneida County, New York, in June, 1839, a young man in his twenty-fourth year. The beauty and fertility of the Rock River valley, in Wisconsin, had been widely proclaimed by participants in the Black Hawk War and in the glowing reports of Government engineers. In fact, the latter declared it to be a very Canaan of promise. As a consequence, hundreds of young people, restless and ambitious, and very many older ones whom the panic of the late 30's had separated from their business moorings, turned their thoughts and then their steps toward the new promised land.

When my father was rowed ashore from the steamer at Milwaukee, he could have taken up "government land" within the present limits of that city, but the bluffs and swamps of the future metropolis had no charms for him compared with the vision he had in mind of the Rock River country. So he crossed Milwaukee River on a ferry at the foot of Wisconsin Street, walked out on a sidewalk quavering on stilts until solid ground was reached at Third Street, and then struck the trail for the west. Not many miles out he passed Byron Kilbourn, with his surveyors, locating the line of the canal which he was to construct from Milwaukee to the foot of the rapids at Watertown, and through which Mississippi steamboats were expected to pass in a few years. But alas! only one mile of the canal was ever completed. For a time it remained a useful factor

as a waterway in the industrial system of Milwaukee, but a few years ago it was filled up and is now an active business street. And no steamboat ever ascended the Rock from the big river farther than Jefferson. Along the shore of Pewaukee Lake, the traveler met a wolf which bristled and snarled, but at last surrendered the right of way before the superior bluff which was put up against him, backed by a "big stick." That night he stayed with a friend named Terry who had come West the year before and pre-empted a piece of land on the east shore of the Rock, about seven miles above Watertown. The next morning he saw on the opposite bank a gently rising slope, covered with stately maples and oaks; beneath were the grass and flowers of mid June, and the swift flowing river, clear as a spring brook, was in front, making the scene one of entrancing beauty. It was fully equal to his highest expectations, and he never rested until he had secured title to that particular block of land.

Father at once prepared to build a log house, and, after a few days, the neighborhood was invited to the raising. Some came eight and ten miles, and a big laugh went around when it was found that logs a foot and a half and two feet in diameter had been cut for the house. Four large ones were rolled together for a foundation, and then the inexperienced young man was told that for a house he needed to cut logs half as large, and they would return in a week and raise them. This they did, showing the kindly, helpful spirit of the early settlers.

In August my mother came and brought the household furniture from their Oneida County home, together with a year's provision. The trip from Milwaukee to their log house, nearly forty miles, took nearly three days by ox team. She was delighted and happy with the building and its surroundings, and never faltered in her love for that first home in the West. A barrel of pork was among the supplies she had brought, and people came as far as twenty miles to beg a little of it, so tired were they of fresh meat from the woods, and

fish from the river; and they never went away empty handed, so long as it lasted.

They came as I have said, in 1839, and I the year following. There is a vague, misty period at the beginning of every life, as memory rises from mere nothingness to full strength, when it is not easy to say whether the things remembered may not have been heard from the lips of others. But I distinctly recall some very early events, and particularly the disturbance created by my year-old brother, two years younger than myself, when he screamed with pain one evening and held his bare foot up, twisted to one side. My mother was ill in bed, and the terrified maid summoned my father from outside, with the story that the baby's ankle was out of joint. He hurried in, gave it one look and being a hasty, impetuous man, he declared, "Yes, the child's ankle is out of joint; I must go for a doctor." And in another moment he would have been off on a seven-mile tramp through the dark to Watertown. But the level-headed woman on the bed called out, "Wait a minute; bring me the child and a candle;" and a minute later she had discovered a little sliver which pricked him when he set his foot down, and extricated it between thumb and finger. "There," said she, "I don't think you need walk to Watertown tonight."

Indians were so numerous that I don't remember when they first came out of the haze into my consciousness, but probably in my third year. They were Winnebago and Potawatomi, the river being a common inheritance of both tribes. In the winter of 1839–40, about thirty families of the former tribe camped for several weeks opposite our home and were very sociable and friendly. Diligent hunters and trappers, they accumulated fully a hundred dollars worth of otter, beaver, bear, deer, and other skins. But a trader came up from Watertown in the spring and got the whole lot in exchange for a four-gallon keg of whisky. That was a wild night that followed. Some of the noisiest came over to our house, and when denied admittance threatened to knock the door down, but my father told them he had two guns ready for them, and they finally

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left. He afterwards said that he depended more on a heavy hickory club which he had on hand than on the guns—it could be fired faster.

An ugly squaw whose nose had been bitten off years before in a fight, stabbed her brother that night, because he refused her more whisky. He had, according to custom, been left on guard, and was entirely sober. The next day the Indians horrified my mother by declaring that they should cut the squaw into inch pieces if her brother died. They went down to Lake Koshkonong two days later, but he died the first day out. The squaw escaped and lived a lonely life for years after, being known up and down the river as "Old Mag."

At any time of the year we were liable to receive visits from Indians passing to and fro between Lakes Horicon and Koshkonong. They would come into the house without ceremony further than staring into the windows before entering. Being used only to town life at the East, my mother was afraid of them, but she always carried a bold face and would never give them bread, which they always demanded, unless she could readily spare it. One summer afternoon, when she had finished her housework and had sat down to sew, half a dozen Indians, male and female, suddenly bolted in and clamored for bread. She shook her head and told them she had none for them. When she came West she had brought yeast cakes which, by careful renewal, she kept in succession until the family home was broken up in 1880. Upon the afternoon referred to, she had a large pan of yeast cakes drying before the fireplace. Seeing them, the Indians scowled at her, called her a lying woman, and made a rush for the cakes, each one taking a huge bite. Those familiar with the article know how bitter is the mixture of raw meal, hops, and yeast, and so will not wonder that presently a look of horror came over the Indians' faces and that then they sputtered the unsavory stuff out all over the newly-scrubbed floor. My mother used to say that if they had killed her she could not have kept from laughing. They looked very angry at first, but finally concluding that they had not been poisoned and had only "sold" them-

selves, they huddled together and went out chattering and laughing, leaving my mother a good share of her day's work to do over again.

One day I saw a big Indian shake her by the shoulder because she wouldn't give him bread. She was ironing at the time and threatened him with a hot flat iron till he hurried out. Another came in one warm summer afternoon, shut the door behind him, and leaned against it, glowering at her. For once she was thoroughly frightened. He had with him a tomahawk, having a hollow handle and head, that could be used as a pipe. However, her wits did not desert her. Seeing the cat sleeping peacefully in the corner, she cried, "How did that cat get in here!" and catching up the broom she chased pussy around till she reached the door, when seizing the heavy iron latch she pulled it wide open, sending Mr. Indian into the middle of the room; she then pushed the door back against the wall and set a chair against it. The Indian stood still for a minute, then uttered a grunt and took himself off, probably thinking she was too dangerous a person for him to attempt to bully.

The Indians used to offer for sale venison, fish, and maple sugar, but the line was always drawn on the latter, for it was commonly reported that they strained the sap through their blankets. And you should have seen their blankets! About 1846 a company of civilized Oneidas, some of whom my father had known in the East, camped near by and manufactured a large number of handsome and serviceable baskets. From wild berries they would make dyes that never faded, and print them on the baskets with stamps cut from potatoes. Some of their designs were quite artistic. A small basket and a rattle which they gave my year-old sister showed their good will.

I soon learned to have no fear of the tribesmen, although sometimes a fleet of fifty canoes would be in sight at once, passing down the river to Koshkonong; but the first Germans who came to our parts nearly scared the life out of me. Their heavy beards, long coats, broad-visored caps, and arm-long pipes, made me certain that nothing less than a fat boy of five

would satisfy their appetites; and whenever they appeared I would hunt my mother. They had bought a considerable tract of land a few miles east of Watertown and about five miles from our place, and always wanted to know of us the road thither. The result was just such a "jabber match" as could be expected where neither side knew the other's tongue; but by pointing and motioning my mother was always able to direct them. Sometimes they wished to come in and make tea or coffee on our stove, and eat the luncheon of bread and meat that they had brought across the water. They would then always urge their food upon me, so I came to like their black bread very much and soon revised my first estimate of their character. All those people cut fine farms out of the heavy timber and died rich.

The first settlers were mostly Americans, from New York and New England; but before leaving the old farm we used to hear of English, Irish, Dutch, Norwegian, and Welsh settlements. The latter people enveloped and overflowed our own particular community and came to form a good portion of the population. The well-known Rev. Jenkin Lloyd Jones, of Chicago, his brother, a regent of the State University, whose recent death is so widely lamented, and their sisters, who teach the Hillside Home School near Spring Green, lived in an adjoining school district. I myself learned to count up to sixty in Welsh, and to curve my tongue around some of their strange syllables.

Besides the numerous nationalities on this front edge of advancing settlement, there were people of many and diverse individualities—the uneasy, the unlucky, the adventurous, the men without money but full of hope, the natural hunters, the trappers, the lovers of woods and solitudes, and occasionally one who had left his country for his country's good; all these classes were represented. But on the whole the frontier's people were an honest, kindly, generous class, ready to help in trouble or need of any kind.

If there was sickness, watchers by the bedside and harvesters in the field were promptly forthcoming. If a new house

or barn was to be raised, every available man came. If a cow was mired, and such was often the case, her owner easily got all the help he wanted. Husking and logging and quilting bees were common, and in the autumn there were bees for candle-dipping, when the family supply of candles would be made for a year; and all such events would of course be followed by a supper, and perhaps a frolic. Visits among the the women folk were all-day affairs; if the husbands were invited, it would be of an evening, and the call then would last till midnight with a supper at ten. There was a world of comfort and good cheer in those forest homes. I doubt if any child in modern palaces enjoys happier hours than were mine on winter evenings, when resting on the broad stone hearth in front of the big fire place, with its blazing four-foot log, the dog on one side and the cat on the other, my father told stories that had to be repeated as the stock ran out, and I was gradually lulled to sleep by the soft thunder of my mother's spinning wheel. What could be more luxurious for any youngster?

I remember that when I was about six I saw my first apple. Half of it came to me, and I absorbed it as if to the manor born. What a revelation it was to a lad who could be satisfied with choke cherries and crab apples! In those times, when a visitor called it was common to bring out a dish of well washed turnips, with plate and case knife, and he could slice them up or scrape them as he chose; and they did not go bad. The woods abounded in wild fruits, which the women made the most of for the winter season. Berries, grapes, plums, and crab apples were all utilized. The latter were especially delicious for preserves. Taken raw off the tree, the boy who did it could not get his face back into line the same day; but he would eat them. However, pumpkins were our main reliance for present and future pies and sauce; such pumpkins do not grow now in these latter days. There were two sugar bushes on our place, and a good supply of maple sugar was put up every spring. Many other dainties were added to our regular menu, and a boy with such a cook

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for a mother as I had, needed no sympathy from anyone the whole world round.

The river was three hundred feet wide opposite our house, and about two feet deep, so teams could be driven across at ordinary stages, but foot passengers depended on our boat, a large "dugout." I remember how beautiful it was, when first scooped out from a huge basswood log, clean, white, and sweet-smelling. Strangers and neighbors alike would call across, "bring over the boat;" and if they were going from our side they would take it over and leave the job of hollering to us. At early five years of age I could pole it around very nicely. One day, when I was first trusted to go in the boat alone, a stranger called over and as my father was busy, he told me to go after him. The man expressed much wonderment, and some hestitancy to trusting himself to the skill and strength of a bare-footed boy of five; but I assured him I was a veteran at the business. He finally got in very gingerly, and sat down flat on the bottom. All the way over he kept wondering at and praising my work until I was ready to melt with mingled embarrassment and delight.

At the shore he asked me unctiously how much he should pay. "Oh nothing," I said. "But let me pay you. I'd be glad to," said he. "Oh! no, we never take pay" I replied, and dug my toes into the sand, not knowing how to get out of the scrape, yet well pleased at his high estimate of my service. All the time he was plunging down first into one pocket of his barn-door trousers and then the other, till at last he fished out an old "bungtown" cent, which with much graciousness and pomposity he pressed upon me, until my feeble refusals were overcome. I took the coin and scampered away so fast that I must have been invisible in the dust I raised. Showing it to my father, he said I ought not to have taken it; but I explained how helpless I had been, and repeated word for word what the man had said and, unintentionally, somewhat copied his tone and manner. The twinkle in my father's eye showed that he understood. That copper was my first-earned money; if it had only been put out

at compound interest, I ought, if the mathematicians are right, to be now living in *otium cum dignitate*, perhaps.

Steve Peck was one of the most notable of the marked characters above hinted at. He was a roistering blade, who captained all the harumscarums of the section. Peck was a surveyor and had helped at the laying out of Milwaukee. Many were the stories told of his escapades, but space will not permit of their rehearsal here. He had selected a choice piece of land and built a good house; then he induced Christine Maitland, daughter of an Aberdeen ex-merchant of aristocratic family but broken fortune, who had sought a new chance in the wilds of Wisconsin, to share them with him. But wife and children could not hold him to a settled life, and he sold out one day to a German immigrant, gave his wife a few dollars and disappeared, not to be seen or heard of in those parts again. The wife's parents had both died and their second daughter returned to Scotland, taking the younger of the two little girls who had come to the Peck home. Mrs. Peck remained, caring for the other and finally married again. Her little Jennie grew to fine womanhood, and was for years the efficient forewoman of the famous Sherman farm near Burnett Junction; she now lives in comfortable retirement in Chicago. Her sister, following the fortunes of her aunt and foster-mother, Agnes Maitland, who married a Scottish laird, enjoys all the pleasures of wealth and aristocratic life in the old world. Thus even the frontier had its romances.

Another character was a man named Needham, who also was somewhat of a mystery. The women considered that he had been "crossed in love." He affected a sombre style, rather imitating the manners and habits of the Indians. His cabin was near the river, and he was a constant hunter. Many times when playing by the shore I would become conscious of a strange, noiseless presence, and looking up would see Needham paddling by, swift and silent. It always gave me the shudders and sent me to the house. One day, on coming home from school, I saw a great platter of red meat on

the table. I asked who had killed the beef; it was a practice to share the meat with the neighbors, whenever a large animal was killed, taking pay in kind. I was told it was not beef, and being unable to guess was at last informed that it was bear meat, which Mr. Needham had left. As he had killed the animal near where I hunted the cows every night, the news gave me a sensation.

Uncle Ben Piper, the only man in the community with gray hair, kept tavern and was an oracle on nearly all subjects. He was also postmaster, and a wash-stand drawer served as post office. It cost twenty-five cents in those times to pass a letter between Wisconsin and the East. Postage did not have to be prepaid, and I have known my father to go several days before he could raise the requisite cash to redeem a letter which he had heard awaited him in the wash-stand drawer, for Uncle Ben was not allowed to accept farm produce or even bank script for postage. Two of his grandsons now do a good share of the grocery business at Madison.

An Englishman named Pease, who lived near us, had "wheels." He thought the Free Masons and the women were in league to end his life. Every night he ranged his gun and farm tools beside his bed, to help ward off the attack that he constantly expected. Nothing could induce him to eat any food that a woman had prepared. In "changing work" with my father, which often occurred, he would bring his own luncheon and eat it by the fire during mealtime. But after my sister was born, he refused to enter the house; he told the neighbors that "women were getting too thick up at Cowe's." Pease had nicknames for all the settlers but one, and while very polite to their faces, he always applied his nicknames in their absence.

A man named Rugg lost caste with his neighbors because he dug and used a potato pit in an Indian mound from which he had thrown out a large number of human bones. Some of the bones were of gigantic size.

There were many good hunters among the settlers; the Smith brothers scorned to shoot a bird or squirrel except

through the head. If there were sickness in the family of any neighbor, the Smiths saw that partridges, quail, or pigeons, properly shot, were supplied.

Another Smith was a bee hunter, and a very successful one, too. Those were the days when the beautiful passenger pigeons at times seemed to fill the woods and the sky. Deer were very abundant; I have seen them eating hay with my father's cows; and in the spring and fall seasons the river was covered with wild ducks and geese.

Occasionally, preachers would come and hold service in the school-house, but Watertown was the main reliance for supplying religious needs. Rev. Moses Ordway, whose portrait hangs in the Museum of the State Historical Library at Madison, was our most notable visitor. He was a man of great ability, energetic, wilful, but large-hearted. I am told that he officiated at my baptism. Nevertheless I was a little afraid of him, for he had a bluff way that I did not then fully understand. Churches which he established at Green Bay, Milwaukee, Beaver Dam, and other points are still flourishing. He had two sons; one of them, Hon. David S. Ordway, an eminent lawyer, died two years ago at Milwaukee; the younger, Capt. James Ordway, of the 5th Wisconsin Regiment, was killed at the top of the Confederate parapet at Rappahannock.

Rev. W. G. Miller, a Methodist missionary, used to range from Green Bay southward. He held occasional meetings at the Piperville school house. He wrote a very interesting book entitled, *Thirty Years in the Itinerancy* (Milwaukee, 1875).

Two events in my seventh year left a strong impression upon me. The first was an address by a colored man named Lewis Washington, a runaway slave, who had a natural gift of oratory and made many speeches in this State. I was so curious to see a genuine black man that I got too close to him when he was in the convulsion of putting on his overcoat, and caught a considerable thump. No harm was done, but he apologized very earnestly. I have read that his campaigning of the State was quite effective.

The other occurrence was the visit to Watertown of Herr

Dreisbach with his famous menagerie. Our indulgent father took my brother and myself and a neighbor's daughter, whose own daughter is now the wife of a leading Madison divine, to see the "great instructive exhibition." It took our ox-team three hours to make the seven miles, and the elephant's foot-prints by the bridges, and the other impedimenta of the great show, which we passed, carried our excitement, which had been cruelly growing for three weeks, well nigh up to an exploding climax. I was told not to lose my ticket, or I could not get in; and when the ticket taker seized hold of it, I held on until he finally yelled angrily, "Let go, you little cuss!" whereupon my father came to his rescue. The show on the whole was very satisfactory, except for the color of Columbus, the fine old elephant, which for some reason, probably from the show bills on the barns, I had expected to be of a greenish tint. I also had supposed that the lion would drag his chariot at least half a mile, with the driver in heroic pose, instead of merely two cars' length. Herr Dreisbach afterwards showed on Rock Prairie, in the open country, a few miles east of Janesville. People came from great distances to attend, even from as far as Baraboo, sometimes camping out two nights each way.

Our first public edifice was a log school-house about twenty feet square. It was on the opposite side of the river, nearly a mile distant, but I began to attend school before I was fully five years old. A Miss Shumway taught the first two summers; the third we had a Miss Mendel, daughter of Deacon Mendel, a famous Abolitionist at Waukesha. One of the things I remember of her most distinctly is, that she used to hang a five franc piece, tied with blue ribbon, around the neck of the scholar who had "left off at the head." I was occasionally favored, but my mother's satisfaction was greatly modified by her fear that I would lose the coin while taking it back the next day. My last "school ma'am" was a Miss Parmeter.

Near the school lived a family named Babcock, with four well-grown boys. One of them used often to come over at noon to see one of the teachers. One noon, on running to the school room after something that I wanted, I was horrified to see my

loved teacher struggling to prevent the young fellow from kissing her. I felt very sorry for her, and on going home promptly reported the outrage to my mother. She evidently did not approve, but did not make as much of a demonstration over it as I had expected. I doubt now, if the teacher was as greatly in need of my sympathy as I then thought. The Babcocks all went to the war, as I am told, and one of them, Walter, became colonel of his regiment. He came home to be fatally and mysteriously shot one night on his way to his room in Chicago; the why and how were never revealed. These teachers probably could not have passed a normal school examination, but they could do what our graduates now cannot do—that is, make and mend a quill pen. Those were all the pens we had, and many a time have I chased our geese to get a new quill. The teachers patiently guided our wobbling ideas from the alphabet to cube root. The lessons over, we were told to "toe the crack," and "make obeisance," and were then put through our paces in the fields of general knowledge. I still remember, from their drilling, the country, territory, county, and town in which we lived; that James K. Polk was president, that George M. Dallas was vice-president, and that Henry Dodge was governor. What ancient history that now seems!

The winter after I was six years old I went to a school taught by a fine young man named Martin Piper, a relative of Uncle Ben's. The next summer he enlisted in the Mexican War with another of our young neighbors, John Bradshaw. I saw the volunteers from Watertown filling two wagons that carried them to Milwaukee, and I could not keep the tears back, for I feared I should never see John and Martin again. And so it was; they both perished at Vera Cruz.

My last winter's school was taught by my father. I remember that we used to cross the river, which only froze along the edges, on cakes of ice which he would cut out and pole across. The school closed in the spring with an "exhibition," consisting of declamations, dialogues, a little "play," and a spelling contest. The whole countryside was there, and about thirty of

us youngsters were put up in the attic, which was floored over with loose boards to make room for our elders. The only light we had was what percolated up through the cracks, and all that we could see of the exhibition was through them. As we hustled around, sampling them to see where we could see best, we made a good deal of disturbance. The best place, next the chimney, we were driven back from, for repeated burnings had weakened the support. (The beam next to the chimney used to catch fire nearly every day, and we younger ones used to watch it and report to the teacher, who would calmly throw a dipper of water up and put the fire out for the time being.) A fat woman sat under the dangerous place that evening, and made a great outcry if we came near to enjoy the desirable outlook—stout people always seem fearful that something will fall on them. I remember also that her little girl, a pretty creature in curls and pink dress, spoke "Mary had a little lamb" by having it "lined out" to her.

Our school house was so set in a noble grove of oaks, elms, and maples with a heavy undergrowth, that it could not be seen from the road. Nearly every day droves of cattle went by, and we used to run up through the thicket to see them. It must have been an odd sight to the drovers to see a dozen or more little half-scared faces peering out of the brush, and no building in sight. They would often give us a noisy salute, whereupon we would scamper back, telling of our narrow escape from dangerous beasts and men.

The presidential election in the fall of 1848 aroused a good deal of interest, for Wisconsin had now become a state and citizens could vote for national candidates. I was in Jonathan Piper's store one evening, with my father, when about a dozen men were present. A political discussion sprang up and grew hot, and finally a division was called for. Two or three voted for Zachary Taylor, the Whig candidate; one, Mr. Piper, for Lewis Cass, the Democrat; and the rest for Martin Van Buren, Free Soiler. The State went with the lone voter, for Cass carried it by a small plurality.

Good health was the rule among the hard-working, plain-

living pioneers, but plowing up the soil released the poison which nature seemed to have put there on guard, and every one at one time or another came down with the "shakes." However, the potent influences of sunshine, quinine, and cholagogue speedily won their way, and in a few years malaria had become a mere reminiscence.

In November, 1848, Mr. Ordway induced my parents to move to Beaver Dam, and thus our life in the Rock River country came to an end. The splendid primeval forest has now gone, and even before we left much of it had been converted into log-heaps and burned. Every night scores of fires would gleam out where the finest hardwood logs, worth now a king's ransom, were being turned into smoke and ashes. Even the mills which that grand pioneer, Andrew Hardgrave, had built in 1844, to the great rejoicing of all the people, are gone, and the river flows on over its smooth limestone floor, unvexed as of old. But fine brick buildings have taken the place of the old log structures, and land brings at least twenty times as much per acre as then. Who can argue against that logic?