

Early Days: The Story of Sarah Thal

Wife of a Pioneer Farmer of Nelson County, N. D.

(Written [down?] by Martha Thal)

One wonders, on reading a story like Sarah Thal's, how many of the European immigrants who came to settle on the edge of the Western wilderness would have left their native locales had they known quite what to anticipate in the New World. Mrs. Thal's memoir first appeared in Pioneer Stories Written by People of Nelson County, North Dakota (Lakota, N. D.: American Press, n. d.). The poem furnished here as an appendix was taken from a work entitled Early History of Lakota and Vicinity, by Mrs. H. A. King.

When [I was] a child attending the religious school, the story of the sojourn of the Israelites in the Wilderness stirred my imagination. I too longed for a sojourn in the wilderness. I did not know that my dreams would become a reality, a reality covering long years of hardship and privation. I grew to womanhood in the town of Ellingen in the Saar Valley, and when I married Solomon Thal in 1880, I went to live in the picturesque village of Berg in the Mosel Valley. I remember this country as quiet and picturesque, where life was pleasant and peaceful.

My husband had brothers in Milwaukee who sent home glowing reports of conditions in America. We wished to try our luck in that wonderful land. When my daughter Elsie was fourteen months old we left to make our fortune, fully confident of our undertaking. We sailed from Antwerp and landed in Boston. I brought with me my linen chest, feather beds, pillows, bedding, etc. I have some bits of these things today. As most of the immigrants of that time were German, we reached Milwaukee without difficulty. Here my brother-in-law met us and took us to his home. I had become ill during the last part of the journey. I went to bed at once to learn I had typhoid.

My brother-in-law Sam Thal advised us to go to Dakota Territory. He had been out there and thought highly of the prospect. In fact, he had a large farm out there only twenty-eight miles from the

railroad. My husband was anxious to get started and as soon as he could leave me he went out there. Six weeks later I followed. The only English I knew was "Yes" and "All right," and when my fellow passengers admired my baby and asked, "Is it a girl?" I said "Yes," and when they said "Is it a boy?" I said "Yes." I didn't know why they looked at each other and smiled.

MENDELSON WAS ANXIOUS TO GET HOME

I had never seen frame houses until we reached America. Everything I saw from the train window was interesting and new. At St. Paul I changed trains. Here I sat my baby down. She followed a woman who had a cage of white rats. I managed to find her just in time to catch my train. We reached Grand Forks late at night. Being unable to speak English, I could not make my wants known so I went to bed without supper. In the morning I went to the dining room for breakfast. A man who spoke German told me that if I took breakfast I would miss my train. I reached Larimore hungry but safely. Here I met my husband. He was wearing a buffalo skin coat, the first I had ever seen. With him was Sol Mendelson, the manager of the Sam Thal farm, which is now known as the Pioneer Farm.

It was late in October, the air was cold, it snowed a bit later in the day. I had never ridden in a wagon. They had their wagons loaded with provisions for the winter. I climbed up on the seat, wrapped my baby in her shawl, and drove off into the unbroken prairies. The road was a rude wagon trail. Here and there we passed a sod cabin or shanty and saw a patch of plowed ground. Toward midday we came to a rude tavern kept by the Charles Adlers, somewhere in Adler Township. Here we had a good dinner and a good visit as they spoke German, and I made lifelong friends. I was very tired, and it was so cosy that my husband wanted to spend the night. Mr. Mendelson was anxious to get home, so there was nothing to do but follow. However, I believe had I spent the night here, my impressions of this new and wild country would have been more favorable. Toward dark our team lost the road and we drove into a buffalo hole and upset the wagon. These have long since disappeared along with the buffalo skel[e]tons which covered the landscape at that

time. The horses had unhitched themselves. My husband was holding the lines and was obliged to follow them home as they hurried across the prairie.

We could see a light in the distance which we believed was Harrisburg. Mr. Mendelson was so nearsighted that I was obliged to lead the way. I carried my baby. We found ourselves back at our starting place three times and it was after midnight when we finally reached Harrisburg. Here we found an escort with a lantern who saw us home. Everyone was in bed so I was obliged to go to bed hungry once more.

Here we found a comfortable eight-roomed house which had been built the previous spring. The furnishings had come from Milwaukee. There was black walnut furniture, the beds were the high posters of that day, the dressers and tables were marble top, and in the living room they had upholstered furniture covered in hair cloth; practically all of this furniture is still in use in the community today.

A few days later Mrs. Mendelson and the hired girl, as maids were known in that day, left to spend the winter in Milwaukee, and I was left in charge of the household. Here I learned to make bread with dried yeast and flap jacks and biscuits and pies. Sam Stoner was foreman. From him I learned my first English. A newcomer must of course experience much embarrassment. My worst was one day Mr. Mendelson brought in a crate of pork and asked me, a piously reared Jewess, to cook it. In time I consented. However, I never forgot my religious teachings. I did, however, discard the dietary laws and practices, but to this day I observe the Passover (New Year's Day [*sic*]) and the Yon Kipper [*sic*] (the Day of Atonement).

THE STORM LASTED THREE DAYS

We had few neighbors. At Harrisburg there was a little settlement and owing to the large tract of land the farm stood on, we had only one near neighbor, the Seligers, another Jewish family. We received mail rarely. A stage ran from Harrisburg to Larimore. The service was not dependable and getting mail was a big event.

About six weeks after I came I experienced our first real blizzard,

a true Nor'wester. The Seligers' cabin was so poorly built they were afraid to spend the night there. Mr. Seliger came to our place and asked if he might have the team to bring his wife and baby. The storm was such that a team couldn't have found its way. My husband advised him to keep to the plowed ground which ran from his door to ours. He reached home and started out with his family. He was obliged to let go of them for just a bit and he lost them. Late at night he came to our place almost frozen. He had been searching for his wife and baby since mid-afternoon. The storm lasted three days. During that time no one ventured from the house, and when it cleared mother and baby were found about fifty feet from their house, of course frozen to death. Their bodies were taken to their cabin and word was sent to the nearest settlement by Mr. Buzz[a]rd, a lawyer from Larimore. A few days later a sleigh full of men and women came from somewhere. We heated water and thawed the bodies sufficient to fit them in a home made coffin. They were buried on the homesite and as I couldn't speak English I never learned who those kind people were or where they came from. I remember that beautiful baby to this day. She wore coral ear rings and necklace. The frost glistened on her cheeks making her look more like a wax doll than a once live baby. The tragedy and the horror of that experience is as clear in my memory as though it happened yesterday.

About the next spring there was much excitement. The Great Northern [Rail Road] was to be extended, and the survey showed that it would run from Larimore along the north side of Stump Lake. The town of Wamduska sprang up over night. A corporation was formed and a hundred bed hotel was built, the Wamduska House. The promoters were Messrs. Bown, Clifford, Marklerny, whose grove bears his name today, Dodds, Sam Thal, and Mike Mendelson. The others I do not recall. They made their own bricks. The remains of the kiln stands today. The hotel was opened with a dance. I think that ball would be more fitting. Stories of the splendor of that event lived for many years. Women in evening dress, long trains, fans and diamonds, and men in clothing of all descriptions. This poor venture lasted only until the Great Northern survey was changed. Then the promoters departed for new ventures. The

building stands today, queerly out of place on the north side of Stump Lake, and speaks of the high hopes of the fortune hunters of that day and place.

THE INDIANS NEVER CAME

In the spring of '83 we homesteaded land in Dodds Township along the supposed railroad right of way. A Mr. Anderson, long since dead, built a four-room house. The lumber was hauled by ox-team from Larimore. The nearest store was in Bartlett. We drove there to get some things we needed. Money was scarce and prices were outrageous. I paid \$3.00 for a set of flat irons.

Here we planted our first garden. My, how I loved to watch things grow in that newly broken land! We planted onions in the uncultivated sod. They were the finest I have ever raised. In fact, I have never had such a good garden since. I could go into a nearby slough and pick a large pan of wild strawberries in a few hours. How I treasured them! The first prairie fires destroyed these beautiful vines and in a few years the wild berry was no larger than it is today.

That fall I would look out of the window and see fires in the distance. These I believed were far off factories. I was still unable to realize the completeness of our isolation.

That fall my second baby, Jacob, was born. I was attended by a Mrs. Saunders, an Englishwoman. We couldn't understand each other. It was in September. The weather turned cold and the wind blew from the north. It found its way through every crack in that poorly built house. I was so cold that during the first night they moved my bed into the living room by the stove and pinned sheets around it to keep the draft out and so I lived through the first child birth in the prairies. I like to think that God watched out for us poor lonely women when the stork came. All but two of my neighbors survived their many confinements and lived to see their children grown.

On the tenth day Mrs. Saunders left me. She was needed at home. My faith in that kind Providence was strengthened on the twelfth day. That morning Mr. Mendelson came with two wagon loads of

potatoes. He was on his way to Mate's, to market them. He wanted my husband to come with him. I protested so he stayed at home. About noon I smelled smoke. I went outside to see what was burning and discovered the roof in flames. I called my husband. He hurried up to the roof and I kept him supplied with water, cans of milk, slop, etc., and he managed to put the fire out before it destroyed the building. The roof had caught fire from the stovepipe. Brick chimneys were looked upon as an extravagance in those days. All the time we fought the flames two foxes sat on their haunches and watched us. They seemed to be mocking our desperation.

The house was so badly damaged we couldn't stay there, so that afternoon we packed up our belongings and moved to the Sam Thal timber claim at Stump Lake. Here I saw my first log house. We found it warm and comfortable. The timber was being stolen for firewood. Our duty was to watch it. The Mahoney Brothers, Mike and Jerry, were our only neighbors. They were woodcutters. I cooked their dinners for them and baked their bread all through the winter. In the spring they offered me \$5.00 for my work. I refused to take more than \$3.00 and felt fully paid at that. We have laughed over this a good many times since. In the nearby wood lived a family whose name I do not remember. The man was taken very sick. The nearest doctor was in Larimore, so in midwinter they covered a sleigh with canvas and put that poor sick man in it and drove across the unbroken snow in all that cold. I never heard of him again. One day when the lake was frozen Mr. Cronen came to see us, asked us if we had a gun. He told us we were in danger. The Indians were in the habit of crossing the lake on the ice. We were unaccustomed to firearms, and besides we never feared the worst. The Indians never came, but the prairie wolves did. They would come right up to our cabin and howl all through the night.

A PRAIRIE FIRE IN THE EAST

In the spring our baby was taken very ill. I wanted a doctor so badly. There was a terrific storm, and when it cleared the snow was ten feet deep. My husband couldn't risk a trip to Larimore. On the fourth day [t]he [baby] died unattended. I never forgave the prairies

for that. He was buried in the lot with Mrs. Seliger and a child of the Mendelsons. For many years we kept up the lonely graves. In time the wolves and elements destroyed them. They are unmarked in all save my memory. All the neighbors came to the funeral. Among them were Mr. and Mrs. Gutting. Afterwards we became fast friends. The friendships of those days lasted as long as life itself.

When spring came, we moved back to Milwaukee, and here our third child was born, and when she was a little more than a year old my husband wanted to go back to the farm. In the spring of '86 we went back. The Great Northern was now completed as far as Devils Lake. Lakota was our station. We found it a hectic and thriving settlement. The country was quite well settled now. We had neighbors on all sides. They were the Stoners, four families of Faheys, the Strattons, Elliotts, and Franzens. There were others, but I did not know them.

I brought back some furniture from Milwaukee, a Brussels carpet, some lace curtains, some good dishes, some rocking chairs, [a] walnut bed with mattress, [a] sewing machine, and a dresser. This was commonplace in Milwaukee but here they were real luxuries. They gave me no end of comfort, and my neighbors in their rude sod shanties envied me our new frame house with its good cellar and brick chimney. For many years that sewing machine was the only one in the neighborhood. My neighbors used it and helped lighten their burdens.

The next fall my fourth child was born. I was ill most of that winter, with no help excepting what the neighbors volunteered. At one time when I grew worse, we sent for Dr. Jackson from Lakota. He had gone to Harrisburg to make a call. Here he was caught in a blizzard which lasted three days. He didn't come until the sixth day.

That spring we planted our first crop and our life as farmers commenced in earnest. After that we had a hired man, a new one most every spring. Most of these were nice boys from good homes in Canada, Illinois, Wisconsin, or Minnesota. They became a part of the household. It took considerable skill to drive a four- or an eight-horse team, and those who could do this well were as proud of themselves as were the men who drove the first tractors in later years.

All of our neighbors had children at this time, but there were no schools. This was a great worry to me. In the year of 1890 we had our first school. This was attended by the children of the Doughertys, Stoners, Schuhs and Faheys. I can't remember the teacher by name. The next year there was no school, and two years later my two eldest went to the nearest school in Williams Township, a distance of about three miles. Two years later we donated a granary. We had a term of school of four months that year. Dan Dougherty was the teacher. Several years passed before we had a regular term of six months each year.

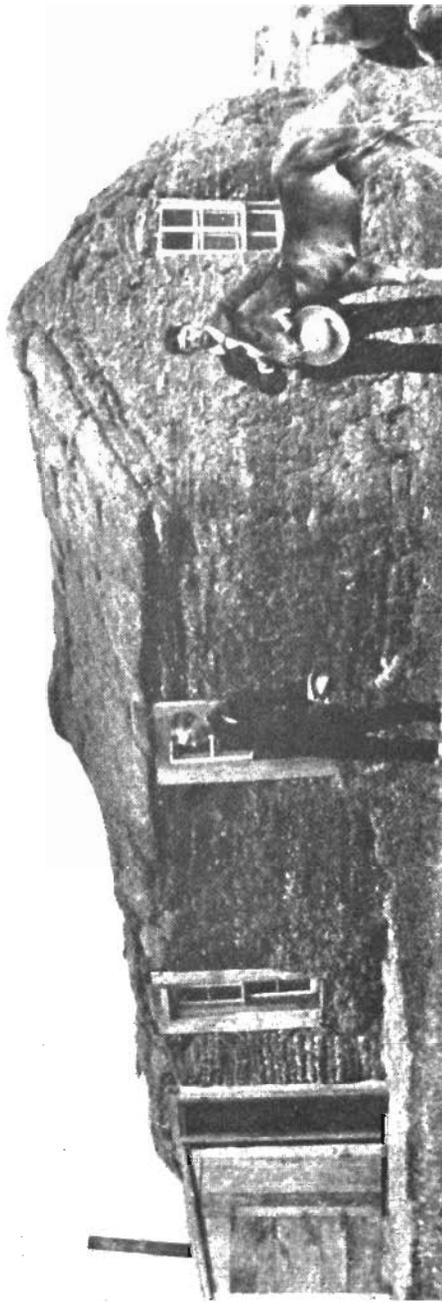
One fall after the grain was in shocks at nightfall, we saw a prairie fire spring up in the east. It must have been many miles off when we first saw it. The flames reached to the sky. We could hear it roar and crackle. We barely managed to plow a fire break to save our crops and buildings. In those days everyone kept a supply of sacks on hand. They were dipped in water and the flames were beaten out in that way. Many severe burns were sustained, and we had many narrow escapes.

THE FEED BOXES WERE LICKED CLEAN

Farming was more of a gamble in those days than now. After several crop failures, we had a bumper wheat crop which we were obliged to sell for 36 cents per bushel. That year I borrowed money from my sister to pay the hired man. The next year we had another good crop. It rained all fall, so that the grain rotted in the field unthreshed. In those days a threshing crew was made up mostly of neighbors. The only skilled men were the engineer, separator man, band cutters, and straw buckers. They burned straw for fuel. Threshing was the big excitement of the year. The women of the neighborhood helped each other. Breakfast was served before day-break and supper after dark.

These bad years were the beginning of the crop credit system which has proven both helpful and harmful to the farmer.

I was never happier than when my husband traded off his bronchos for good horses from the East. A team of bronchos ran away with us at one time and smashed a new set of harness and a new



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The unbroken prairies
A sod shanty in pioneer North Dakota

spring wagon. I was badly bruised and had my shoulder broken. This frightened me, and I never learned to drive a horse. At one time we had a hired man who spent all his spare time trying to ride a broncho mare. She never let him stay on her back, and he never gave up trying. She was still unbroken when he left. The spirit of those wild horses has no equal.

About this time I had made the acquaintance of Mrs. Stratton. She wove rag carpets, three yards for fifty cents. She was something of an artist. She would take faded colorless rags and dye them bright colors and weave them into gay patterns. These added comfort and cheer to many who hungered for the comforts they left behind. From her I learned to make citron and green tomato pickles and cakes and pies, and in turn I taught my neighbors how to make coffee cake, potato salad, cottage cheese, noodles, etc. Canned tomatoes were a great luxury and were used on state occasions.

The first auction sale must have taken place in the fall of '88 or so. All the men from the neighborhood went to town. A blizzard came up. They were unable to get back. It was late in the fall and we had no hired man. My husband had left a scant supply of fire wood, just enough to last through the day. At night I saw that he could not get back. I brought in the saw horse and ax, and when the children were in bed I tried my hand at the wood saw for the first time. It took all of the evening for me to saw and split enough wood to last through the next day. The storm lasted three days and nights. I spent each evening in this way. On the fourth day it cleared. I went out and the snowdrifts were as high as the house, packed so hard that I could walk over them. In the barn the stock had not been watered or fed for three days. The feed boxes and mangers were licked clean. I went up to the hayloft to throw down some hay and when I came down the cows and horses had broken their ropes and were gone. The stock had been brought from the Sam Thal farm. When I looked in that direction, I saw them hurrying pell mell across the field. They knew where to find feed and water. When the men returned, each was relieved when he sighted his home and saw the smoke coming from the chimney. Their families had survived the storm.

MRS. FAHEY MILKED THE COWS

Card playing was a favorite winter pastime. The neighbors would gather in each other's homes. When extra men were needed, a lantern was hung out and left there until they came. I can't remember that this signal ever failed. Pedro was the game. Often on beautiful moonlit nights our neighbors would come to see us, bringing their entire family. When the children grew tired, we put them to bed, and the women would proceed to get up a meal, cooking meat and potatoes, making pies and biscuits. We had no labor saving foods in those days, but we had good jolly times on these occasions.

In winter we killed our meats and froze them. In summer we bought fresh meat from the market and kept it by tying it to a rope and lowering it into the coolness of the well where it kept as though on ice. Fresh fruit of any sort was almost unknown. I still remember the delight my children knew when they received their first barrel of apples, a gift from their Uncle Sam. We used Arbuckle's coffee, paying a dollar for eight pounds. Our fare was meat and potatoes, bread and vegetables. Everyone had good gardens and dried fruits. Syrup and jelly came in large wooden pails. Biscuits and jelly, pancakes and syrup constituted the favorite breakfast. I wonder how many pancakes I fried in those many years for those at-daylight breakfasts. I never learned to milk a cow. On one occasion when my husband and [the] hired man went threshing and did not return at night, I waited until dark. The cows came home to be milked. I tried my hand at milking. I sat under a gentle and patient cow for nearly an hour and succeeded in getting only a few drops of milk. I grew desperate and drove my cows to the nearest neighbor. The man was away, and Mrs. Fahey milked the cows for me and I carried home the heavy pails, a distance of about three-fourths of a mile.

Some of our neighbors were immigrants or greenhorns, as they were called in those days. Most of them learned to swear before they could speak English. Often in winter their voices would echo across the frozen snow.

We received mail when we went to town for it or if our neighbors brought it for us. It must have been about the year of ninety when

we had our first local paper, the *Nelson County Observer*. Shortly after that, we subscribed for the *Milwaukee Herald*, the German weekly. Later on our reading matter consisted of the *Chicago Ledger* and the *Blade*, the *People's Home Journal* and the Bertha M. Clay novels. These books and "story papers" were passed about from neighbor to neighbor. In the winter time in the long evenings I did my sewing for the year. I had learned to knit when a girl and could sit in the dark and put a heel or toe in a stocking. I did all the knitting of stockings for a family of six.

Our neighbors, the Stoners, built a new frame house with a porch on it and painted it white. This was the first painted house and porch in the community. They planted trees which lived and grew into fine trees, about the first in the community. They were also successful in raising currants and raspberries, rhubarb, and flowers. By and by the neighbors followed suit. A new house was an event. On a Sunday all the neighbors would come together bringing their hammers and probably lay a floor or put on a roof. The host would provide a keg of beer and a supper, and all would be merry. I think that must have been why most of the roofs sagged and why the walls usually leaned to the side.

THE MUSICIANS WERE ALWAYS ON HAND

When a baby was born, the children in the family were sent to the neighbors to stay for the time, so that the mother could have rest and quiet the first few days, the only rest many of these women ever knew. The rest of us would take home the washing, bake the bread, make the butter, etc. The well water was hard and unsuited for washing. In summer we caught rain water in barrels and in winter we melted snow. All the women in the neighborhood save two lived to see their children grow up. Mrs. Tom Fahey died, leaving seven children, the eldest fifteen. Mrs. Franzen died, leaving eight, the eldest a girl of eleven. Their close friends and neighbors spent more time at their bereaved neighbors' than at home those first few months. It was expected of one, and I am sure no one ever shirked his duty to his neighbor.

A winter funeral was a queer sight: sometimes a home-made

coffin in a bob sled, followed by sleighs of every description, an open cutter, a covered cutter, a grain box on a bob sled, a stone boat with a canvas top, a home-made sled with a box of unpainted planks, and every one bundled to the ears with jugs of hot water at their feet wrapped in blankets. There was a Catholic cemetery at Bartlett and at Michigan, a Protestant one at Lakota. Crude as these funerals were, the dead always received their full measure of respect.

As time went on things grew better in some degree for those that stayed. Some of our neighbors had lost their land, being unable to pay off their mortgage. Sometimes the original debt was only a few hundred dollars.

On summer nights sitting out of doors our neighbors and hired men would sing songs of their time. The favorite[s] were, "The Dying Cowboy," "Clementine," and "Home Sweet Home." The Stoners had a parlor organ. Some of the Dougherty boys played the fiddle. A new barn was always dedicated by a dance. The neighbors came from far and wide in buggies and wagons, on horseback and on foot, and later on bicycles. There always seemed to be plenty of time for these [dances], and the musicians and some one to call off the quadrilles were always on hand. Decoration Day was always celebrated in town. The children came from everywhere and marched with the G. A. R. [Grand Army of the Republic, Civil War veterans] to the cemetery. This they considered a most sacred privilege. The Fourth of July was usually celebrated at Stump Lake, the picnic with speeches and fire works and a dance at night.

One year all the Germans of the community were asked to a Fourth of July picnic at the Gutting Grove. We looked forward to this with great anticipation. I had just finished ironing the last piece for the next day's outing when I saw it clouding up, a greenish gray. The storm broke and with it came a terrific hailstorm, the worst in my memory. When [it was] over, our beautiful wheat was cut to the ground. The next morning the sun came out. We couldn't disappoint the children, we drove to the picnic, a distance of twenty-two miles, each way, around the lake and up and down the steep hills, a heavy day for a team. Each foreign colony celebrated in their own

fashion, loyal to the traditions of the old land and faithful to those of the new.

By this time most of the sod houses and barns had been replaced by frame buildings and such luxuries as buggies and driving horses became common. There were schools in every district. Then came hanging lamps, upholstered furniture, carpets and curtains, and when the cream separator came into common use I felt that the pioneer's days were gone and that the land was tamed forever. Year by year the wild ducks and geese became fewer, the storms became fewer and less severe, and the Northern Lights less mysterious.

Appendix

Mrs. Solomon Thal told me this story, too,
Of the experiences—when her life here was new,
A story, too, of Romance in those olden days
Has found its way to light—from out those devious ways.
The heroine from Vaterland came o'er across the sea
And went to clerk in Sam Thal's store in famous Milwaukee.
He also had another clerk, a thrifty, nice young man,
His nephew, I believe it was—by name of Mendelsohn.
Perhaps he might be kin to the musician of that name.
However that may be—he needed wealth nor fame
To win the maiden's heart, for straightway it would seem
When they first met, for them commenced "Love's Young Sweet
Dream."
They wanted to be married, but, sitting hand in hand,
Resolved that first they'd try to get a little land.
Mr. Thal had told them of North Dakota's land of plenty.
(And they were young, she was eighteen and he was only twenty.)
And they could each take up a claim, and then be free to marry.
They made such wondrous, happy plans, no longer need they tarry.
So they came to North Dakota, to the town of Larimore

Where they filed upon their claims, and when that task was o'er,
Returned they to Grand Forks again, where they were duly married.
But to the Pioneer farm, they wanted to be carried.
They thought 'twould be a nice place to spend their honeymoon,
In such a cozy place as that 'twould surely be a boon.
Companionship, the young bride thought, how nice upon a farm,
A husband to protect her from danger and from harm.

They had to go by lumber wagon always in those days
And that was pretty tiresome when they traveled a great ways.
The roads were nigh impassable, the sloughs were muddy, deep,
The trails at times were hard to find, the hills were high and steep.
One long slough south of Larimore was so very deep and wide
They had to cross on horseback and take their turn to ride.
As each one crossed they stood beyond, upon the other side
To wait there for the others, but first they brought the bride
In all her wedding finery, her hose and shoes of white,
But, alas, before she reached her home, these were a sorry sight!
And as she stood there patiently, and waited for the rest,
She pondered on her happiness, and thought she was most blest.
She tried to banish from her mind how cold she was and wet
To wait in patience for her friends, who were not over yet;
The water was so high and deep, in crossing o'er the slough
They got their garments drenched, all soaking through and through.
And when they all were over, the young bridegroom so gay
Went to assist his bonny bride, but found to his dismay
She could not move her feet, they were frozen to the ground!
(They really had to get an ax and chop the ice around
Before the bride could be released,) and it was many a year
Before she quite forgot that time of agony and fear.
For her feet were nearly frozen, standing in that icy spot,
Her journey was a torture, her honeymoon forgot.