

+++++++-----J. R. Steele Describes Union Twp. As It Was When He Was A Boy---
75 Years Ago

The Grinnell Register, Grinnell, Iowa
Monday, August 7, 1922
page 3

It is a far cry from the days of ox-drawn carts, wild deer and marauding Indians to the present day and its comfortable civilization, and for many of us it is difficult to realize that right here in Poweshiek county, the Indian once roamed and hardy pioneers endured privations which seem almost unbelievable but it is still more difficult to realize that these experiences took in the lives of men still living. One of them is J.R. Steele of Montezuma, who in the following interesting letter tells of conditions when he arrived in 1846: Editor of Register:--

In compliance with your request that I write some of the early history of Union township I will say that we all experienced about the same things. One family didn't have more than their neighbors.

I was born in Morgan county, Indiana in 1845 and came with my parents to Union township in 1846. My father landed here with 15 cents in money, one horse, and one cow but the cow died in a short time. He took a claim and built a cabin on it, worked til he got the money to enter it, paying \$1.25 per acre. The cabin was built of round logs, the cracks daubed with mud, the roof covered with clapboards about four feet long, rived out of oak trees and held down with poles of logs to hold them in place. The floor was made of puncheons, as they were called. The puncheons were from the linn tree about one and one half to two inches thick, as wide as the tree would make them and hewn a little with an ax. The chimney was built about four feet high of split logs four feet long, the remainder of little sticks one to one and a half inches square and three feet long, and the whole thing daubed with mud or clay. The hearth or place to build the fire was filled up to the level of the floor with dirt. The door was made of clapboards six feet long with wooden hinges and a wooden latch. A string run thru a hole in the door and was attached to the latch so it could be opened from the outside. When the string was pulled inside the door could not be opened from the outside and so served as a lock. Our furniture consisted of five or six stools made from split logs, which served as chairs. Our bedstead was made of two poles and one post built in the logs of the house and two in the post then the ends of poles inserted. We had a trundle bed made of little poles, which was pushed under the big bed through the day. Our cooking utensils were limited to a Johnnycake board, a skillet and what we called an oven. We lived on cornbread, wild game and vegetables. The cornbread was baked by dividing the dough into two pones or loaves, putting them in the little cast iron oven which had a lid. We dragged

out some coals on the hearth, set the oven on the coals, put on lid and covered with coals. The Johnnycake board was about ten inches wide and two feet long with rounded corners. They made the dough stiff, spread it on the board an inch thick and propped it up on the hearth before the fire which was always of wood. As to flour, that was something we seldom had and when we did mother made biscuits and baked them in the oven the same way as the cornbread. For a cupboard, holes were bored in the wall, wooden pegs driven in and boards laid on top. After father got able he built a hewn log house with undressed lumber for floors and door, and had a brick chimney, the roof of shingles were from oak logs. It was considered a very fine house at that time and we were very proud of it. The house still stands but has been weatherboarded and plastered until it can't be told from a modern frame dwelling. (2009- The home has long since be torn down. Matt and Marisa DeJong now own the property and their pole barn stands on the site of the log home.)

When we first came here it was a wild country, nothing but Indians and wild game, no churches, no school houses, no roads, no bridges. We had to ford all streams, the Indians had paths thru the timber. They did not need a wide road as they always rode single file and there would be from fifty to one hundred riding one right after the other. We sometimes went to their camps. They treated us well. If we should be there at meal time they would invite us to eat with them. My uncle was along one time and by some means or other he insulted one of them and they all called him a "mean clemoka man" and told him to "pucachee hiko way penuch" (meaning leave and go away off. At one time the report got out that there was to be an uprising, and we and our neighbors far and near gathered at the Will Terbell farm, (owned at that time by a McIntyre, I think.) ((2009 address at the time of this recopy is: 791 Diamond Trail Road now owned by Willie and Kathy Van Ommen. A new house stands on the site.)) We watched all night with guns stacked on the porch. It proved to be a false report as no Indians appeared.

The first laid out road passing through Union township was, to the best of my recollection, the state road now known as the Diamond Trail and I think it was one of the first roads in the state. The cause of it was that the settlers or those owning land, met the surveyor when he came to their land and had him run where they wanted it without regards to lines. It has been straightened a little in some places from the original survey.

Wolves were numerous at that time and often would kill sheep, hogs and calves. Deer and wild turkey were plentiful. Father would go out and kill a deer most any day, so we kept plenty of venison on hand all the time. As for wild turkey we had them so much we got tired of them. We had a small orchard of about one-quarter acre planted to corn and in shock the winter of the deep snow. I have seen as many as four hundred turkeys at one time in that orchard eating corn. We had to watch every day to keep them from eating up all our corn. The snow was so deep that everything was covered up in the food line and wherever there was anything to eat out of the snow, there you would find plenty of turkey. Men drove their teams over high fences without any trouble.

The first school house built in Union township was called the Freewill school house located on the southeast corner of Section 8 built of logs the same as our cabins. It had

one window on each side the full length of the house and about four feet off the floor, a wide two inch plank in front of them for a writing desk. The seats were made of split logs eight or ten feet long, the flat side up with legs about one foot long in all, except the seats at the desks which were the full length of the house and much higher. Money to pay the teacher in those days was raised by subscription, usually the teacher would charge about two dollars a scholar for a three month term of school. At that time teachers did not have to be examined for certificates, anybody could teach that was scholar enough to teach those that might come. About the first thing a teacher would do the first day of school was to get a good hickory switch four or five feet long and he did not stand back to use it if necessary and sometimes when I thought it wasn't necessary.

In those days almost everyone worked oxen to do their farm work or anything they had to do as there were only a few horses in the country. They would yoke the oxen hitch them to a big wagon on Sunday morning, load the family in and go a visiting. The man most generally walked and drove or sometimes would ride one of the steers. Father had oxen and we all did our work with them. I would yoke them up, get on one of the steers and ride to the field to plow, and after work ride home again. It is not a very easy matter to ride a steer as they are sleek and there is nothing to hold to. I was like all other boys, always trying some project, so one day as I went thru the lot I concluded to ride one of the steers without its being yoked. It frightened him so badly he started to run and he ran toward the fence. I thought he would stop when he got to it but he didn't: he jumped the fence with me on him and as he raised his foreparts to jump I slid back on his hips. Be as he went down over the fence I slid back to his shoulders and stuck on, I thought I would rather go a-foot, but was riding and couldn't get off. He ran forty to fifty rods, headed for a brush thicket and there being nobody there to head us off I wished myself off a good many times, before we got there. When we did arrive I tried to stay on but couldn't as the brush pulled me off and I fell behind the steer. I got up and went to the house a-foot feeling better than when I was riding.

The first church built in Union township was the Little Mount Baptist church, in 1854, which was burned down during the Civil War. Since then they built the building which is still standing. (2009- A memorial stone now stands in the location of the church.)

The first election was held at the residence of a man by the name of Woodward, located on Section 9, the farm now owned by Dr. E. B. Williams. Father was one of the judges of the election and was also elected trustee at that election.

We had to drive our hogs to market. Some drove to Iowa City and others would butcher and haul them to market. When they drove them they took wagons along to haul the ones that gave out which often happened. They would pen their hogs when night overtook them, stay all night and start on again next morning.

Our wheat was cut with cradles and threshed with rails or tramped out with horses. When using horses we cleaned off a piece of ground, called a floor, set a post in the middle with a pin in the top, took a long light piece of wood with a hole in the middle, laid it across the top of the post with the pin run through the hole so it would turn easily. This was called a lead. We tied two horses to the end of the lead, threw in wheat where

the horses would walk and start then up. Being tied to the lead they would go around in a circle and tramp the grain out, then took the straw off and cleaned the wheat with a ran mill.

Most of the men here went to mill on horse-back with a sack of shelled corn or wheat to get ground for them. The first and nearest mill was ten miles.

The nearest doctor was forty miles away. My father settled here in the timber because he thought the prairie land would never be settled. All the settlers were of the same opinion and I have heard many say that the prairie this side of Grinnell would never be settled for they would freeze to death hauling fuel,

This is as I saw it in my boyhood days.

J.R. STEELE,
Montezuma, Iowa

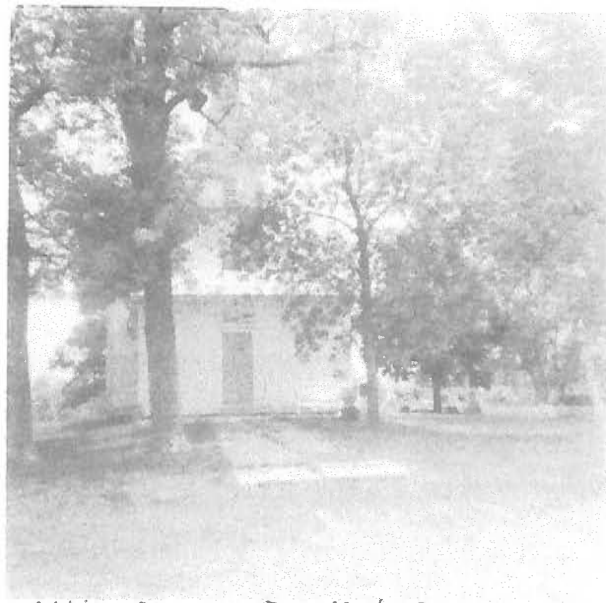
This article was recopied in 2009 by Cecily Ann (Wheeler) Unruh just as it was printed in the newspaper except for reference points of location noted in parenthesis. Joseph Richard (J.R.) Steele was the grandfather of Cecily Unruh.

This is the log home referred to in this story. The left half of the home was the log house which in this photo has been covered with siding to match the right side addition. Jo and Kate Miller lived in this home for many years.



Log home covered with siding to match the right side addition. Jo and Kate Miller lived in this home for many years.

This is a photo of the Little Mount Baptist church which has since been torn down. A memorial stone marks it's location.



Little Mount Baptist church which has since been torn down. A memorial stone marks it's location.

On the left of this photo is Joseph Richard Steele,
the author of this article. His daughter, Garnette
Mae (Steele) Wheeler is in the center and his wife
Ruth Mae (Davis) Steele is on the right.

The J R Steele family



Submitted by
Cecily Ann (Wheeler) Unruh
5008 80th St
Montezuma, Ia 50141