

## Home Life in Early Days

In this reminiscence, Martha Valentine relates her experiences as a Kansas housewife during the early years of white settlement in Kansas. Valentine and her husband Daniel first came to Kansas in 1859 and eventually settled permanently in Peoria, Franklin County, in 1860. She describes how, in that same year, a severe drought hit Kansas and eleven months passed without rain. Her family suffered from the drought, having to subsist mostly on stored corn, small game animals, and wild vegetables. Many people in her neighborhood suffered during this time, sometimes requiring aid sent by Easterners. Copied from the Topeka Capitol, February 23, 1908.

Creator: Valentine, Martha

Date: February 23, 1908

Callnumber: Biographical Scrapbook V, v. 2

KSHS Identifier: DaRT ID: 211075

Item Identifier: 211075

[www.kansasmemory.org/item/211075](http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/211075)

KANSAS  
HISTORICAL  
SOCIETY



*Topeka Capital*  
*Feb. 23, 1908*  
*Mrs. D. M. Valentine*<sup>13</sup>

## Home Life in Early Days

THE PRIVATIONS OF THE PIONEERS IN THE  
DAYS OF THE GREAT DROUTH WERE MANY

(By Mrs. D. M. Valentine in the Club Member.)

It will be fifty years the fifth day of next July since my husband, myself and baby landed from a steamboat in Leavenworth. We had started from an interior county in Iowa and were bound on an inspection trip of the Territory of Kansas. We brought with us a big white horse and an open buggy, and this was our conveyance in our journeyings over new roads, over virgin prairies, stopping in towns and villages when convenient and with hospitable farmers when necessary. It was indeed the trip of a long lifetime, full to overflowing with the sweetest pleasures of new experiences. After a few weeks of sightseeing, driving over a considerable part of the then known Kansas, spending one night in Topeka, we returned to Iowa. We knew we intended to go to Kansas, to make a new home, and so pre-empted a farm, or rather some raw prairie land, about 20 miles south of Topeka. We never lived on it, and I am now unable to locate the land exactly. It took but a few months to straighten out our very limited affairs in Iowa, and then we found ourselves on the back track, and by the summer of 1859 real residents of the new State, locating first in Leavenworth. Ten months were enough of city life, so in the early spring of 1860 we moved to Peoria City, the then county seat of Franklin county. This village was located on the banks of the Marias des Cygnes river, about eight miles east of the present city of Ottawa, though at that time all the country surrounding where Ottawa now stands was an Indian reservation and Ottawa was not even in contemplation. On our way from Leavenworth down to Peoria City we forded the Kansas river at Lawrence, a thing few people ever did; in fact, I have never been told by any other woman that she had a similar experience. The river was very low, but the quicksand was very deep, and it took considerable effort and ingenuity to keep the horses going, for the quicksand, a stiff current and a strong wind threatened to upset us at any moment.

In Peoria my real pioneer life in Kansas commenced, though as a girl and a young woman I had experienced pioneer life both in Ohio and Iowa; and here in Peoria also commenced the long stretch of years so full of both hardships and happiness, and here really commenced the long and happy life in Kansas to which I now look back.

The year 1860 was the year of the terrible drouth; such a drouth as probably had never visited the State before, and

such as has never visited it since. Eleven long months without a drop of rain. The spring opened rather promisingly, though dry, but no rain came, and soon the growing crops, the wild berries, the prairie grass, the natural and planted forage, and every living vegetable thing withered where it grew, died and scattered to the northward before the heavy, hot, scorching blasts that blew continuously from the South. If by chance there was anything which through favoring circumstances retained life, the grasshoppers, swarming in clouds, settled upon it and completed the work of devastation. Then was the ingenuity of the housewife taxed in equal proportion to that of the provider. All through that hot summer, and up to late in the fall when aid commenced to come in from the Eastern states, there was actually not a potato, tomato, head of lettuce, cabbage, onion, radish, bean or any kind of garden vegetable to be had in that village or the surrounding country. Neither was there any meat of any kind excepting a little wild game, nor any butter, eggs or even milk. The cows dried up. So did the wells, and we carried water for household purposes other than washing clothes nearly a mile up the highest bluff in Kansas. We took our washing down to the river and did the laundry work in pools of water left in the river bed; dirty, filthy water as I remember it now. We did not waste any water at our homes you may rest assured. The children were certainly not weakened by too frequent baths.

In the neighboring field a few turnips managed to grow, and these furnished both vegetables and fruit diet. Because of a lack of market quite a good deal of corn had been left over from the year before, so we had mush without milk, and cornbread and such other corn dishes as desperation could suggest. I have made cornbread day after day until the odor of its cooking would almost nauseate me, so tired had I become of it; but I had to make it and had to eat it, too, for at times there was nothing else. One time I got some potatoes from the "Aid Store." As I was peeling them for boiling purposes, an old lady who happened to be calling on me, seriously chided me because I did so, for even potato peelings were too precious to be thrown away. Can any woman who has ever done her own cooking think of a worse situation in the face of insistent demands of vigorous young appetites? That winter Mr. Valentine killed many prairie chickens which came to feed on the sumach bushes surrounding our house like a young



2

14

orchard, for there was nothing else for them to eat. But they were very thin and poor, there was no lard to cook them in, no butter to season them with, and dry prairie chicken is about the most uninviting substitute for something toothsome and nourishing of anything I know about. Think of eating a prairie chicken every day so cooked and served. Mr. Valentine also managed to gather a large crop of hickory nuts, which helped out some; they were not served for desert, either, but were part of the real meal. Certain it is that the woman of the house had as fearful a time indoors as her husband had fearful outdoors. Nothing to cook but corn, nothing to season it with, little to cook it in, few conveniences to serve it with. The aid donated by the East kept many from actually starving; kept many in the few clothes they wore.

There were no stores to speak of for there was nothing to sell, and while we had a little money there was nothing to spend it for. A neighbor who grew faint-hearted, concluded to go back East and sold us a peck of dried peaches, and these peaches were the only luxuries in the neighborhood, so were used largely for the sick. For a while there was not a pound of flour in all the miles around that I knew anything about. I am afraid this sounds like a complaining note, which is not intended, for it is a fact we were cheerful and happy far beyond the picture. We helped each other to the best of our ability in a material way, made a sport out of our necessities, tried not to lose heart, and acted like any other community of young men and women, sanguine and optimistic, would act. Comparatively few journeyed back East; nearly all stuck it out to a glorious victory. We made coffee out of parched corn principally, though occasionally we would use barley or parched oats; tea was a whispered luxury. Even sugar was beyond reach and a little sorghum molasses took the place of all sweetenings.

A year or two later, when our old home and marriage fineries were about exhausted, came the necessity of buying clothes, bed coverings and such. Calico was the almost universal dress goods for women and small children, and it cost 40 cents per yard, when cents were as hard to get as dollars were later. Beds, the best of them, were made up with one sheet, muslin. And such muslin! It would not be considered good enough for horse blankets now days. The heavy gingham came later, and they were dress-up materials. Not the pretty, tasty and dainty ginghams of the present market, but heavy, coarse and really ugly ones. But the ginghams never wore out and they served their purpose well down to the second and third members of the family, who finished them as shirts. Then there were the balbriggan petticoats, costing dollars upon dollars of some man's hard labor; heavy and dark at the top, highly colored in vivid stripes running round and round above the hem. After the "Aid" flour came in we made underclothing out of the flour sacks; and not only for the children, either. Matches were so scarce and expensive that we used them only in cases of absolute necessity. It is a joke among my children to this very day regarding my economy in the use of matches, but fifty long years have not been sufficient to break me of that habit.

And the snakes. The bluffs and woods and prairies around Peoria were fairly alive with them. Garter snakes, bull snakes, black snakes, cotton snakes, corn snakes, water snakes, rattle snakes, moccasins, copperheads, blue racers, and then some. They were not only our neighbors, but they also visited with us in our homes. One morning when Mr. Valentine put his foot down into his boot a hissing snake disputed possession. Getting dinner one noon I happened to glance over to the table and saw a long snake slowly crawling across the table making for the sugar bowl. Mr. Valentine was home and he killed the snake, as sugar was too expensive in those days to feed to snakes. Another time I picked up a dress off the floor and noticing it seemed rather heavy shook it and a big snake dropped out. But I must stop, for if I should start to tell snake stories the limit of my article would soon be reached. Our experiences with snakes amuse me now, and I laugh as I tell them to my grandchildren, but they were not funny then.