

Incidents of Pioneer Life in McPherson County

This reminiscence was written by Bessie Felton Wilson in March 1926. Bessie's family moved to Osage County, Kansas in 1872, where she was born on February 20, 1873. In 1874, the family moved to McPherson County, Ks.

Bessie includes some family history but the bulk of the reminiscence details the daily life of a pioneer family. She describes hardships such as prairie fires and rattle snakes. She recounts incidents and special events as well as activities of daily life. Some genealogical information is included. This story was written as part of the efforts of Lilla Day Monroe to collect reminiscences concerning the women's perspective in settling Kansas

Creator: Wilson, Bessie Felton

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Incidents

INCIDENTS OF PIONEER LIFE IN McPHERSON COUNTY.

By Bessie Felton Wilson. Written March 1926.

My father, Joseph Boyd Felton, was born in Kingwood, Preston county, West Virginia February 7, 1846. He enlisted in the Civil War when sixteen years of age, belonging to Company B, 14th Regiment, West Virginia Volunteers. On receiving his honorable discharge at Cumberland, Maryland June 27, 1865 he went to Muskingum county, Ohio where he resided for a period of five years, during which time he became acquainted with a Miss Bonifield who a little later was to become his wife.

Elizabeth Ellen Bonifield was born in Licking county Ohio July 13, 1849. While yet quite small she with her parents and other members of the family moved to a farm in Muskingum county, Ohio where she grew to womanhood.

Elizabeth and Joseph were married at Zanesville, Ohio on the thirteenth of March 1872. One week later they left for Osage county, Kansas where Joseph had been working for an uncle for several months. Here at four A.M. February the twentieth 1873 was born the writer of this sketch who was named for both parents, Bessie Josephine Felton. On mother's side my grandfather was Ephram Bonifield and grandmother was Summerville Kennerly Reamy. I do not know grandfather Felton's given name as he died when father was but an infant. Grandmother was Jane Boyd.

In the fall of 1873 father bought the homestead papers of Ave Herrington for S.W. quarter, section 32, range 3 W. in McPherson. county He then returned to Osage county for the winter. In the spring of 1874 we settled on the homestead making the trip from Osage county in a prairie schooner drawn by a pair of colts - a black two year old Nellie, and a small Dun three year old, John. John was slow, but strong and wiry and lived to the ripe old age of twenty seven years. From Council Grove we followed the Santa Fe trail which angled across the prairies in those history making days. My father drove a mother hog and five or six pigs behind the wagon all the way. He was told by parties while enroute that a fellow who had patience enough to drive hogs that distance would sure make it in the West.

Upon our arrival we stayed at the home of father's aunt Mrs. A.G. Steele, until Mr. Steele and father could build our small house which was ten by fourteen feet. My mother at that time considered it a little palace, since it was a frame building and had a board floor, while the majority of the settlers lived in sod shanties with nothing but dirt floors. The lumber for this home was hauled from Salina, a distance of forty one miles.

In February 1875 we started back to Osage county for the rest of our belongings, not having been able to bring them all the first trip. The weather up to this time had been very fine and they decided there was to be no winter. On the twentieth day of this month, my second birthday, the wind blew strong from the north all day and grew steadily colder, turning into a regular blizzard by night. Mother and I stayed covered up in the feather bed most all day to keep warm. That evening we found refuge at the home of a settler where we were compelled to remain for two and one half days until the storm abated. My parents worried not a little during their stay here lest this man should charge them two or three dollars for lodging and hay when all the money they had was a dollar bill. Imagine their surprise when in response to father's inquiry as to what they owed him, they received this reply, "All I charge you, sir, is that you stop and stay over night with



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us on your way back". They made the round trip with out breaking the dollar bill.

After two weeks of very cold weather it turned warm. Because of the early spring the cows and horses lived on grass from the middle of March until fall. This was a great blessing to the settlers since the grass hoppers had taken the corn the previous year.

Following this grass hopper plague of 1874 many of the settlers applied for aid through the King City Grange organization. My parents did not ask for any help but on the day of the distribution were sent the following articles by a passing neighbor: A shoulder bone absolutely minus any meat, an old soiled quilt, and a white vest which had done duty for some large portly gentleman. Father was of a tall slender build so could make no use of it. It was given to me for a play dress and I certainly felt gorgeously arrayed when clothed in this garment which laced up the back with white strings and almost touched the floor. Remember we children in those days had no play things and if we should by chance have received any there would have been no place to keep them.

We lived in the little homestead house for five years, burning corn stalks for fuel both winter and summer. During this time a brother and then a sister were born, making us a family of five. Father then built us a fourteen by twenty foot structure of four rooms, two above and two below. Not having sufficient means to finish it all at this time we slept in the upper rooms several years without plaster. It was not unusual on awaking cold winter mornings to find the covers around our heads frozen, and the bed white with snow which had been driven through tiny cracks in the roof by a strong wind during the night.

Nothing did the early pioneers dread more than sickness for there were few doctors and they many miles away. My weight when two years of age was eighteen pounds, exactly the same as when one year, due to a sick spell. When a little past four I had a very severe attack of appendicitis lying for six weeks on my rightside. At the end of this time I not only lost all my curls but was compelled to again learn to walk. My brother, Bernard, then a lad of two years was very sick at the same time. A young doctor by the name of George, then of McPherson, was called to see us. After several trips made on horse back he informed our parents he had done all he could for us and since he believed we were both going to die thought it not right to keep coming and cause extra expense. Money was a scarce article in those days. I am glad to say however that we both recovered. When thirteen years of age I was seriously ill with diptheria. Mother acted as doctor and nurse. Quite to our surprise none of the other children had it. Two years later (Jan. 1888) four children in the J.B. Jackson home died with this disease inside of nine days.

In the fall for several years many of the settlers were subject to chills and ague. At one time when father was down with the ~~chills~~ ^{chills} mother harrowed the ground for wheat sowing. I waited on father and baby sister as best I could.

I believe "one of the tryingest times we ever had" as Polly Anna would say, was in the summer of 1882 when sister Florence of four years had the misfortune of breaking her right arm at the elbow so seriously that the bones protruded in four places. At this time we children numbered six. The youngest were a pair of twin boys of six months. Mother was suffering from a second felon. Lack of proper medical care at the right time all but cost sister her life. During those critical days while mother must be constantly

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at her beside, I, with what time father had to give and the aid of my six year old brother, did the house work. Our laundrying was accomplished by the use of the washing board and plenty of elbow grease. Our bread was all baked at home. There was a little sister two and a half years old to care for as well as the twin babies. I do not say it boastfully, but where in these days with all the modern appliances (which are so helpful to the house keeper) could be found a girl of less than ten who could do as much.

I want to speak a few words of tribute to Mr. and Mrs. W.H. Walden for their kindness and help to the sick and suffering ones. Many were the times that members of our family as well as numerous other families received aid in the form of medicine or nursing from their hands, ^{they} never making any charges for the service rendered. Mrs. Walden was with mother at the birth of each of my sisters and brothers and later on with me when my son was born. No record is available of the large number of others she ministered to.

Being the only child in the home for a little more than three years, I was much made over by my parents. Many happy hours were spent with father while breaking prairie. He made a sort of pocket for me by tying his old blue army overcoat to the handles of the breaking plow. When a little older I often accompanied him to and from work for the privilege of a ride on John.

Rattlers were very numerous here in the early days. I had narrow escapes at three different times. Once when quite small I crawled upon the roof of the cave to secure a board on which to place my mud pies. The board had ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ been ~~XXXX~~ purposely laid there to cover a hole in the roof to keep out the rain. On reaching the board I sat down and turned it over. There coiled around the hole was a very large rattle snake. It raised its head about five or six inches and began lolling its long red tongue at me. I was too young to be frightened but called, "Oh Mamma! come and see the snake". She came running, catching me by the arm and ruthlessly ^{killing} snatching me from my perilous position. By the time she had finished the snake with the garden hoe she was ready to collapse.

One day when probably about eight years of age I was following father in the furrow while engaged in turning over the sod. We were both barefooted and when the plow uncovered a rattler, father not seeing it in time to avoid stepping on it, made a hasty get away by jumping up over the right plow handle. Turning to me who had barely time to avoid a like procedure said, "Bessie, how in the world did I get out of there".

At still another time when brother Bernard and I were cutting sunflowers (this by the way was our job for a number of years as the only way to get rid of them was by eternal vigilance) I spied a snake coiled around a large sunflower stalk which I was about to cut. We were barefooted as usual and being old enough by this time to realize the danger I was greatly frightened. Giving a terrible shriek I started for the house on the run. Bernard not knowing what had happened called to me to know what was wrong. On receiving no reply he started to follow me but couldn't ~~XXXX~~ begin to keep up. After running as fast as I could for a considerable distance I slowed up looked back, then gave another blood curdling yell and again sped on. He was fully persuaded in his own mind before reaching the house that I had gone crazy.

One summer when my father had a bunch of twenty five or thirty shoats and no corn to feed them, ~~that~~ brother and myself herded them around over the farm where ever there was anything to be found that a hog could eat. After wheat harvest we herded them in the stubble

This could be omitted if to lengthy

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field. How tired we were sometimes and how sore the stubble made our feet! We had several of the hogs named and I use to make my brother believe that they were talking when they grunted, and I being able to understand their hog latin would interpret it to him. When these hogs were marketed we were rewarded for our labors by each being presented with a saddle father had ordered for us from Montgomery Ward & Co. The saddles were for grown ups, so all we could do was to grow into them. This we did in a few short years.

In the spring of 1876 my parents, with the aid of the Steel's, Waldens, Jacksons, and some others organized a Sunday School at King City (known now as Elyria). Two years later when the Victory school house was completed these same families with the Findley's (and a few others who had moved in by this time) organized a Sunday School in our neighborhood. My father acted as superintendent. Father and mother were charter members of the McPherson M.E. Church organized in 1874 by Rev. John A. Simpson. In Nov. 1881 there was an M.E. Church organized at Victory at which time my parents transferred their membership from McPherson. Previous to the organization of this church the services had been union. There was preaching at this place every two weeks for nearly thirty years. The Baptists organized and built a church near the school house dedicating it Dec. 15, 1889.

When Rev. Simpson attended the first conference at Independence Kansas in March 1875 he left his team of ponies in father's care. Mother knowing it would be necessary for the pastor to take a meal with them at this time had no little concern as to what should constitute the bill of fare. Having no sugar she made sorghum cake which proved to be so much to his liking that he asked her for the recipe to take home to his wife.

J.A. Findley taught the first term of school at the Victory beginning the first of March 1878 and continuing three months. My parents being very anxious that I should have a good start in life thought it best to enroll me at this time. Think of a timid little girl of five years walking a mile and a quarter to school alone, staying all day and sitting on a bench against the wall where her feet would nowhere near touch the floor.

In December of this same year two members of the school board, after being interviewed by an agent, decided to purchase seats with desks for the school building. This was done despite the fact that almost every patron in the district, as well as the third member of the board, had expressed themselves at a called meeting as being opposed to buying at that time on account of lack of funds. When the seats arrived these two men with the aid of a friend or two placed them in the school house after night. As soon as the third member found out what had been done he and four or five of his faction went at night and took them out, piling them up in the school yard. Then the first bunch swore out an injunction against the second for one hundred and fifty dollars damage. The seats were again placed in the building where they remained. The law of course protected the men who purchased the seats.

When it was known that Mr. J.B. Jackson was to be married at Ellsworth on Sept. 6th, 1875 some of his neighbors planned a surprise for him and his bride on their return. Mother was asked to bake a cake for the affair. In consequence we ate our bread without butter for several days in order that father might have enough to take to the store and exchange for the amount of sugar necessary



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to make a cake. This he did, covering the sixteen miles horse-back. Mothers was the only cake at this important gathering and despite the fact that she had no recipe to go by and that she used sour milk and soda in the making it was pronounced by those who partook as being all a bride's cake should be.

In the early days most of the bread was made of corn meal. At one time a friend with two small boys came to spend the day. Mother, having a little flour in the house for emergencies, prepared to make biscuit for the noon meal. One little fellow noting the fact ran out doors calling to his brother, "Biscuit cakes for dinner Jamie, biscuit cakes for dinner".

It was thirty four miles to Newton where father took the grists for grinding and mother has been known to grind sufficient wheat on the coffee mill to make pancakes for a period of three days when out of meal and flour.

We had plenty of wild meat in those days but no fruit except a little dried fruit kept for company. Father was continually wearing out the knees of his trousers by crawling to within shooting distance of the geese, ducks, prairie chickens, and quail. Once when mother had patched his trousers until no longer patchable she cut off the legs, again sewing them on with backs to fronts and fronts to backs. My father killed two antelopes and helped to kill one buffalo. On these occasions he always pursued the game on John the old horse.

One day in the summer of 1878 when father was away there chanced to come to our home an Indian beggar. Bernard and I, children of five and a half and two years, were playing in the yard while mother was washing in the shade of the house. When she saw this Indian approaching she stepped to the door and locked it for Florence, a babe of six months, was lying asleep on the bed. His first request was for money and that being denied him he asked for food. This she offered to give, but he refused it when she would not let "heap a good Indian in the house to eat at the table". When told by mother that he wasnt very hungry he left muttering angrily.

One of the greatest dangers to the early settlers was that of prairie fires and every little shanty was surrounded by a ploughed strip of ground for protection, which by the way did not always protect, as a strong wind would carry the sparks a great distance and the thick grass was very easily ignited. The first experience with fire was while yet in Osage county. Some men came running to the house for a tub in which to carry water from a spring a few rods away to wet down the grounds around the house before the fire should arrive. In her excitement mother rushed out and overturned a tub of rinse water in a shed kitchen which she had saved when through washing to scrub the floor giving them the empty tub. The fire came and would have consumed the house but for their precaution. On this occasion an uncle and nephew who had come out from Ohio to visit and hunt hurriedly buried a small keg of gun powder.

As soon as I was large enough to ride a horse alone I began helping father in the haying season.

During the wheat harvest it was no unusual sight to see two or three header barges arrive at the school house on Sunday at the Sunday School hour, for this was the only means of transport when the barge was on the running gear of the wagon.

In the early days here there were times when we did not hear from the postoffice for two weeks. At one such time when a letter written by mothers brother was returned to him in Ohio he sent it

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back to mother bearing this inscription "If not called for in thirty days return to _____".

I remember our attending the blow out the day the Atchinson Topeka & Santa Fe R.R. reached McPherson. A blow out it certainly was. The wind blew a perfect gale, the air was full of dust and flying tumbling weeds. I sat on the wagon tongue and tried to eat my dinner. One could see only a few rods distance.

Some of my happiest recollections of childhood are the three and four day visits in the home of Uncle and Aunt Steele where I was treated to rice and prunes with real cream and on my departure given a generous slice of salt rising bread (of which I was very fond). As soon as I was large enough I began helping Aunt with her work at harvest and threshing time.

Twenty loads of rock were hauled fourteen miles from a quarry at a cost of one dollar and a half per wagon load to wall a fifty foot dug well. I have known mother to draw from this well thirty buckets of water at one time to water the stock when father was away or very busy with the farm work. When at last they were able to put in a pump and windmill what a great help it was.

In a diary I find the following records: Jan. 10, 1888, "Sixty eight loads of ice passed today". This ice was hauled from Lake Inman to Mr. Entrikens ice house in McPherson a distance of nearly twelve miles.

March 18, 1893. "Killed by brother Bernard and Ralph, today, fourteen wild geese."

No travelers seeking shelter were ever turned away by my parents. The ministers made their home with us during the revival efforts as well as many other times.

My father was a strong prohibitionist and was a ~~strong~~ ^{great} admirer of William Jennings Bryan. I think it worthy of mention that neither my father, three brothers, husband, son nor brother-in-law have ever used intoxicants or tobacco in any form.

In April 1885 there came from Bedford Virginia a boy of thirteen years to make his home in the west. A few years later my heart was wooed and won by this Virginia lad and on May 20th, 1896 at eight P.M. in the home on the old homestead I was united in marriage to John W. Wilson. There was born to us a son Claude E Wilson who was married on Aug. 26th, 1920 to a Miss Mary Durst, whose parents were also Kansas pioneers. The first five years of my married life were spent on a farm nine miles south of McPherson, the next five on a farm four and a half miles south of McPherson. From there we moved to the little town of Canton, Kansas in Oct. 1906 where at this time we are still residents.

My parents lived on the old homestead until their death. Mother passing away Feb. 27th, 1914 and father July 27th, 1917.