

**PIONEERING**  
at  
**BONAPARTE**  
and  
**NEAR PELLA**



## **Pioneering at Bonaparte and Near Pella**

by Sarah Welch Nossaman

These recollections of pioneer life were written by Sarah Welch Nossaman so that her children would have some record of her early life. She recalls her family's move to Indiana in 1831 when she was only six years old. In 1835 her family moved again to Bonaparte, Iowa where her father built a pottery. In 1841, they moved again to Fairfield, Iowa where she married. In 1842 she and her husband moved to a new settlement near Pella, Iowa. Unfortunately, her record ends abruptly in 1844 and does not chronicle the Nossaman's later efforts at hotel-keeping and store-keeping in Pella.

## PIONEERING AT BONAPARTE AND NEAR PELLA<sup>1</sup>

By Mrs. Sarah Welch Nossaman

As I am well aware that time is not long for me even if I should live to be very old, as I am now almost to my seventieth milestone, I will try to leave for my children a record of some of my "ups and downs" in life that may be of interest for them to look over after I have crossed over to the other shore.

I was born in Wilkes County, North Carolina, February 26, 1825. When I was about six years old my father emigrated to Richmond, Indiana. We ived there one year. My father bought property in Richmond, but when the Black Hawk or Mackinaw purchase was thrown open for settlement he sold it for half he gave for it for the sake of going to the new purchase. We left Richmond in May, 1831. As it was before days of railroading we moved by horse power, camping out at nights. When we got to the new purchase, the land of milk and honey, we were disappointed and homesick, but we were there and had to make the best of it. My father and mother went to work with a will to put some corn and potatoes in the ground that we might have something to live on the following winter, but it was so late in the season that our corn did not mature and we could not have it ground. It was badly frostbitten, so we had to live on frostbitten roasting ears for six weeks. I can't tell you just how good they were, for you must taste to know. By this time my father and mother were both down sick with billious fever. I was the oldest child and I was expected to cook the corn and the best I could do was to wrap the husk close around the ear and cover it in hot ashes, and heap coals of fire on it till it was done, and when done I would take the tongs and take the corn out and let it cool and take the husks off and it was ready for eating. I can't describe the smell of it, but I will just say cod fish is sweet by the side of a frostbitten roasting ear. But they sustained life and that was about all. About the time our corn was gone, and a few potatoes was all used up (I said a few potatoes, as best I could do in digging I could find only a few bucketfulls) my father got well enough to work on Johnny Hittles' mill, which was two miles from where we lived on the Mackinaw River. There he got a sack of corn meal, but not bolted meal as we now use--bran and all together--and we had bread made of it as it was ground, for we could not afford to lose the bran, and after father got the second sack of meal he went hunting and killed a wild pig and a deer, so we feasted for a while. Perhaps you will wonder why our neighbors did not help us. I will just say our neighbors were in the same fix we were, and they were few and far between.

On the following April the Black Hawk War broke out, and some of our neighbors were killed near us, but we were providentially spared. While the war was raging at its hottest my mother urged my father to go to Jacksonville, the county seat of Morgan County, Illinois, and get his brother, which is old Uncle Johnny Welch of this place, to come and take us down to Jacksonville where he lived. We lived near Jacksonville one year, and after that we moved to Alton, Illinois. In 1835 my father moved to what is now Iowa, but at that time it was part of Wisconsin Territory. We settled one mile below where Bonaparte now is, in Van Buren County. We had but few neighbors, among them being old Uncle Sammy Reed and his brother Isaac, and an Indian trader by the name of Jordan. I think Uncle Jimmy Jordan was known to most of the old settlers of the eastern part of this state. He was my father's nearest neighbor. It was here we had for neighbors Black Hawk, Keokuk, Wapello, Hard Fish, Kishkakosh, Naseaskuk and a score of others of the Sac and Fox Indians. Here we had hard times and often went hungry. We lived there five years, one mile above where Bonaparte now is. The town of New Lexington<sup>2</sup> was laid out, so we had a post office, but if a letter had come for us we could not have taken it out of the office. Letters were not prepaid with a two-cent stamp as they are now, but the one that received the letter had to pay twenty-five cents before he could take it out of the office. While we lived there Black Hawk and his son were frequent visitors and often partook of my father's hospitality.

In 1837 or 1838,<sup>3</sup> I don't remember which, Black Hawk died of malaria fever. One of our neighbors, Dr. James Turner, thought if he could only steal Black Hawk's head he could make a fortune out of it by taking it east and putting it on exhibition. After two weeks' watching he succeeded in getting it. Black Hawk's burial place was near old Iowaville, on the north side of the Des Moines River, under a big sugar tree. It was there Dr. Turner severed the head from the body. At the time it was done I was taking care of his sick sister-in-law, Mrs. William Turner. The doctor made his home with his brother. We knew the evening he went to steal the head and sat up to await his coming. He got in with it at four o'clock in the morning and hid it till the afternoon of the same day, when he cooked the flesh off the skull. So I can say that I am the only one now living that witnessed that sight, for it was surely a sight for me. If the rest of Black Hawk's bones were ever removed it was a good many years after his head was stolen.

The second morning after their ruler's head was stolen ten of the best Indian warriors came to William Turner's and asked for his brother, the Doctor. They were painted war style. He told them he did not know where his brother was. They told him they would give him ten days to find his brother, and if he did not find him in that time he would pay the penalty for his brother's crime. But he knew where his brother was. He was at the home of a neighbor named Robb, Uncle Tommy Robb as he was called by everyone, on the south side of the Des Moines River. But he did not want to find his brother and sent a boy to tell him to fly for Missouri, which he did. The Indians returned to Iowaville to hold council and conclude what to do, and while they were holding council William Turner and his wife made their escape in a canoe down the river. William Turner kept a little store in New Lexington. He got his neighbors to pack and send his goods after him.

6 But the Indians demanded their ruler's head, and for three weeks we expected an outbreak every day, but through the influence of their agent and the citizens together they gave up hostilities for a time. The whites told them they would bring Turner to justice if he could be found. The sheriff chased Turner around for awhile, which only gave him the more time to get out of the way. The Turner family finally all went to St. Louis where the Doctor was found again, and to keep the Indians quiet the sheriff went to St. Louis in search of him, but he did not find him. He did not want to find him. But Turner got frightened and took Black Hawk's skull to Quincy, Illinois, and put it in the care of a doctor there for safe-keeping (I forget the doctor's name) till the Indians would get settled down, and then he intended to take it east. But when he got ready to go east with it the doctor in Quincy refused to give it up, and he did not dare to go to law about it, so after all his trouble and excitement he lost Black Hawk's skull, and not only made Turners endless trouble, but put the lives of all settlers in jeopardy for months. We lived principally on excitement and that was a poor living. But they finally got over it till all was peace and then we were happy. The doctor that had the head took it to Burlington and sold it to a museum and the museum was burned down, so Black Hawk's skull is not now in existence. The Turner family were warm friends of my father's family. They stayed in St. Louis two or three years, I don't remember just how long, and they all three died with the Cholera. So I am left alone to tell the story.<sup>4</sup>

7 My father was a potter by trade. He built the first pottery in the territory, I suppose, in the year 1836, but there were but few to buy his ware, so we had it hard for most of the five years of our stay in Van Buren County. But in 1837 Judge Meek of Michigan came to New Lexington to locate a mill. After looking around for a few days he bought Robert Moffatt out. His claim was on the land where Bonaparte now is. So then we had one neighbor with money. Where Bonaparte now stands was at that time what was called a heavy sugar orchard. Mr. Meek gave my father the privilege of making sugar on his claim till it was all cleared off and put in town lots. I do not mean we made sugar all the time, for there is but four or five weeks you can make sugar in the year, and that is in early spring. But it was three years or more before all of the sugar trees were cut off of the town site of Bonaparte. But when Meek started work that made a little money in circulation. It gave both men and girls a chance to get themselves what was called store clothes, for we all wore homemade cloth then. I for one worked for Meek's family for the first year of their building their mills. I worked for seventy-five cents a week, which was the best wages that had ever been paid in the country at that time. Robert Meek's wife and I cooked for forty-two men, so you may know we did not have much spare time, and that was before days of cook stoves. We cooked by the fireplaces.

8 You will say goods were surely cheap those days when wages were so low. I will give you the price of some of them--calico, 25 to 50 cents a yard; sheeting, such as we have now for 7 or 8 cents, was 25 to 30 cents a yard, and all other goods in proportion.

4 In 1841 my father sold his claim and pottery shop and moved two miles east of Fairfield, Jefferson County, this state. There we took a claim and began anew. There we had it pretty hard again, but not as hard as in Van Buren County. It was there I was married [to Wellington Nossaman] March 17, 1842. I will now leave my father's house and tell you of your father's and my own hardships. We rented a farm near Fairfield the first year we were married. We raised a good crop and had plenty to live on. In 1843 the new purchase being opened for settlement, your Uncle Levi<sup>5</sup> and Aunt Caroline, your father and myself, with our babies then three months old, started to the new purchase. On May 17, 1843, we got to this part of God's footstool. We took a claim four miles south of where Pella now is. 9 But when we got to our stopping place our feelings can be better imagined than described, for there was not a neighbor for fifty miles, no house, no nothing you might say but wild beasts and Indians. But we thought it was the only way we could get a home. We went to work and built a shanty made of poles and covered it with elm bark, not slippery elm, but what we called white elm, but the sun curled it so badly we had to have a new cover every few days, and then it was but littler better than no roof. After we had been at our new home a few days your Aunt Caroline and I went strolling out in the woods, and when we had gone about a mile from our shanty we heard the sound of an ax. We got back to the shanty as soon as we could to tell the good news to your uncle and father that there was surely white people not far away. We knew from the sound of the ax it was not an Indian. To our great joy we soon found it to be a camp of white men, but no women with them. We were not long getting acquainted and have remained warm friends ever since.

I will try to tell you of our first summer's stay up in this part of the wilderness. As I have told you we built a shanty in the thick timber four miles south of where Pella now stands, where we lived for five years, but not in the shanty, as we built a log cabin in the fall. When living in the shanty we had no door nor fireplace, so we could neither cook, nor shut out the skunks nor snakes, and they were both plentiful. We treated skunks very kindly until they were out of the shanty, but the snakes did not fare so well. 10 It was not an uncommon thing to get up in the morning and kill from one to three snakes, but they were of garter snake variety, but we would rather they had stayed out if it had suited them as well. At night it was hard to sleep for the howling of the wolves and the screeching of the owls, and I can't tell you how lonely it made us feel, but God was watching over us in our lonely shanty and kept us from harm, and during the day the Indians were our companions, so you see we were not entirely deprived of company.

As I have told you we got to our claim May 17. I also told you we raised a good crop close to Fairfield. When we started up here we put in our wagon what we could bring in the way of household goods and provisions, and that was not much for we had to make our roads most of the way as we 11 came, and on the evening of July 3 we found ourselves with only half of a dodger of corn bread and that was baked with the bran in it. That and red ——— tea was our supper. So we started by team to Fairfield, Jefferson County, next day for breakfast, but we did not get there the first day.

About one o'clock the day we started, which was July 4, 1843, we stopped to let our horses take their dinners on grass. We stopped near where the new courthouse now stands in Oskaloosa, Mahaska County. All there was of Oskaloosa at that time was three men, a dog, a jug of whisky, an ax, maul, and a load of stakes for staking off lots. Your father said to them, "What are you doing here?" They said they were laying out a county seat. Your father said, "You had better wait till the county is laid off." Canfield, for that was the name of one of the men, made reply, "We are going to lay off the county seat and survey the county around it." But we thought but little of what he said. After our horses had eaten their dinners on grass, we started on to my father's at Fairfield. We traveled till the sun went down and found ourselves at what was known as Waugh's Point, which is now Batavia. There we stopped for the night, clogged our horses and turned them out to eat grass, but we were hungry and tired. We had some blankets with us. We laid them down under the wagon to keep the dew off and laid down on them for the night; but we were too hungry to sleep much. We thought we would get up about three o'clock and start on, but when we got up to start on our horses were gone. Your father started in search and tracked them by the dragging of the clogs through the grass. About ten o'clock he found them several miles from the wagon, so it was after twelve o'clock when he got back to the wagon. It was a long hungry day for me. We started on as soon as we could get ready and at six o'clock in the evening we got to father Welch's, as we thought almost starved to death, but we were not as nearly starved as we thought, but we were hungry enough. You will say, "How was it you were so long getting to Fairfield? We can easily drive it in one day now." But we had to make our own roads. Winding around and hunting out places to cross the streams took much time.

We stayed at my father's three or four days. We got several sacks of meal ground, and we had some bacon we had left down there. We put in the wagon what we could of our household goods we had left down there, and our bacon and meal, and started for our home in the wilderness again. We were three days getting back. On our return we stayed all night where Oskaloosa now is. During our stay at Fairfield, Oskaloosa had made a big improvement. Canfield had built a log cabin and had it covered with clapboards, but did not have the door sawed out. Your father helped him saw out one log so we could creep in and be under a roof, and that was my first night in Oskaloosa. We reached home the day after our first stay in Oskaloosa and found our shanty about as we had left it, but Oh, the mosquitoes, and no way to shut them out! The only way we got any sleep was to cover up head and ears with a thick, heavy cover, and the weather hot enough to almost cook eggs. So you see pioneer life is not all sunshine. It has a great many black clouds.

In August and September we had several new neighbors come in, so we had a post office. A man by the name of Wilson Stanley was our postmaster. The post office was a mile west of our house, for we had a cabin built in September, and then we began to feel more at home. We had a floor to walk on and a fireplace to cook by and a clapboard door to shut. We did not think of such a thing as plank for floors. Your father split puncheons

and hewed them and made a floor of them. When we lived in the shanty and it rained we did not eat for I had to cook by a log fire, as it was before days of cook stoves. It was days of johnnycake boards, dutch ovens, skillets and lids. But you may ask how can you bake bread on a board. I will try to tell you. Take a board eighteen inches long and eight inches wide, round the corners off and make the edges thinner than the middle, spread it with well-made corn dough, set it on edge before a hot fire in a fireplace, and it will bake nice and brown, then turn and bake the other side the same way, then you have corn bread that no one will refuse. Set your johnnycake board in front of something that will keep it on the edge.

I will stop giving receipts and talk of something else. After we got our house built and new neighbors began to come in we began to feel like we could entertain all Iowa. Oh, how contented we were! But the fall of 1844 found us with wheat and corn raised on our new home place, ripe and ready to grind, but our nearest mill was at Bonaparte, Van Buren County, one hundred miles away, and we had to go to mill there. But after awhile we got tired of that, so my father and your father put up what they called a stump mill. I have forgotten just the plan of the mill, it has been so long ago, but the whole thing went round by a six-ox power. It would grind three pecks of corn an hour. They ran it day and night. They did not grind wheat. Often there would be from fifteen to twenty men waiting their turn to get a bushel of meal to take to their hungry families. But it was hard for me for I

14 baked for all of them, and most of the time some of the men that came to mill would go hunting and kill some game, so that would make me more work to cook it. But I did not think it hard. Your father used to say we could keep as many as there were puncheons in the floor, and I sometimes thought there were two to a puncheon. But we had not run our mill but a few months till Cempstalk built a mill north of Oskaloosa on Skunk River that ground wheat as well as corn, and also Dunkin and Dr. Warren started mills on the same river. But Oh, the flour they made! Most of it was a dark gray, for they tramped their wheat out with horses on a dirt floor and had no way of getting the dirt out only to fan it out with sheets or blankets. So you see we ate our peck of dirt more than once. But we were much healthier than than we are now.

To say pioneer life is without its troubles even among neighbors is a mistake, for we had one neighbor that will never be forgotten by the old settlers. His name was John Majors. He broke over all rules and sent to Illinois and borrowed money and when the land cam in market he entered three or four of his best neighbors' homes from them, which caused what is termed the Majors War, and for more than two years we had trouble. They

15 caught Jake Majors, the oldest son, and gave him a coat of tar and feathers and made him deed his neighbors' homes back to them, but they sent off east and borrowed money and paid him what he had paid out for their homes, but he lost the interest for none of his neighbors wanted him to go to so much trouble for them. So Majors all sold out and left here and went to Missouri, so quiet was ours again.