

[A Preacher Tries Farming]

17

Folkway [??] [?] on Farming

A PREACHER TRIES FARMING; OR, WHY I DON'T LIKE SORGHUM OR ONIONS

By George (Dad) Strester

My father was a Methodist preacher and at one time was assigned to take charge of a small church at Indianola, Nebraska, when that country was being settled, our family arriving only one or two years later than the first pioneers, or about 1873.

There were mostly very poor people who came to try to make a living farming in that dry arid country, and father saw at the start that his followers would not be able to pay the preacher enough for him and family to live on, so he took to farming as a side line, and located a homestead a mile south of the general store and post office of Indianola. Here he built a two-room house made of sod out in ribbons three inches thick by twelve in width. The floor was the bare ground with the grass shaved off and tamped to make it firm to walk on. The doors were of boards cleated together and hung with leather hinges.

It was a happy day for all when father and I moved the cook stove from the covered wagon into our new home. We didn't have any table but my pa was quite a genius; he went right to work and made one. He drove four stakes in the ground—all the proper height—and layed the front end gate of the wagon box on top of the stakes and when mother spread the cloth on, you wouldn't know but what it was a beautiful table.

There were about five acres of land that had been plowed before by some settler who had abandoned the place before we came. Father 18 hitched the oxen to the plow and stirred up this patch of earth. He planted part of it to garden vegetables for family use, and the

Library of Congress

balance to onions and sorghum cane, about one half to each. The onions and sorghum were to sell to buy other necessities.

Then I drove the oxen on the breaking plow and turned over about two acres of sod land. This was planted to corn. Father would travel down every third furrow with an ax and at every stop, strike the ax through the sod and I went along with a bucket of corn and dropped four kernels in each hole made by the ax, and stomped it shut with my heel, until the field was all planted.

The season was favorable and we raised a wonderful crop of everything. My brother and I did the most of the work. Father tended to his pastoral duties, and worked with us at his spare time. We built a cellar in the back yard with a dirt roof in which to store our winter supply of vegetables, also a building in which to store the onions. We were all well and happy, plenty of vegetables stored in the cellar, corn for the oxen and cow, which were already fat, from gorging on the buffalo grass. Corn meal for mush and johnny cake, which we ground as needed with a mortar and pestle. The cow gave a bucket of milk at a time, so we had plenty of milk to drink, cream for our mush and butter for our johnny cake.

Mother was an expert at making butter. We also had two dozen hens that were brought along in a crate tied on the back of the wagon. They seemed to be trying to see which could lay the most eggs.

19

There was a great pile of buffalo chips at one side of the house that us kids had gathered and piled there for winter fuel. We seemed to be enjoying the height of prosperity when alas, several things happened to mar our happiness.

One day father opened the onion house to see how they were keeping, and found they had heated and were starting to rot. Father didn't say any cuss words, just "well, well, that's too bad."

Library of Congress

He said something had to be done quick if we saved any of the onions. So we all went to work with a will, and in about a week we had the job done, and we had saved about one half of them, but there were rotten onions scattered far and near. The chickens pecked at them and it made their eggs taste like rotten onions, and the cow ate them and spoiled the milk and butter. So we didn't have cream for our mush or butter for our johnny cake. And father didn't say any cuss words just, "well, well, that's too bad."

So he says we'll harvest our cane, get it into sorghum, then we can have molasses on our johnny cake and that won't be so bad. He set my brother and I stripping the leaves off the cane with sticks while he loaded some onions on the wagon and started out to find a market for them, and get some barrels to put the molasses in. The store keeper at Indianola didn't want any onions so father decided to go down the river to Arapahoe. He traded his load for 12 long boards and two small barrels.

When father got home my brother and I had the cane all stripped and the seed tassels out from the tops, and father helped out the 20 stalks which had to be kept from touching the ground and piled them on some leaves or seed tassels to keep them clean. Then we loaded them on the wagon and started for a sorghum mill which was one days drive over prairie where there was no road.

About noon we came to a dead carcass. The oxen stopped, smelled it, started to bellow an paw dirt, then bolted, and, one being a little faster runner than the other, they ran in a circle, and the cane being very slippery, it all lost off the wagon before father could get the oxen stopped. Father didn't say a cuss word, just says, "well, well, isn't that too bad." He brought the team and wagon to about the center of the scattered cane, unyoked the oxen and turned them loose to grass, while we went to work loading our cane. This took until dark when we made a dry camp for the night. We arrived at the mill at noon the next day. We made a bargain with the man who owned the mill to make the molasses for half if father would drive our oxen on the sweep to grind the cane and we boys would feed the stalks between the rollers. The owner of the mill was to do the boiling of the juice. We

Library of Congress

finished the next day and the following morning loaded our two little barrels of molasses, and started for home. We hadn't traveled far, when I noticed the bottom of the wagon box was nearly covered with molasses. Both barrels had sprung a leak. Father didn't cuss, he just said, "well, well, that sure is too bad." Then he urged the oxen to the top of their speed (which was about three miles per hour) in an effort to get home before all the sorghum leaked out, and when we arrived we emptied one barrel 21 into the other and had just enough to fill one barrel which we set over a washtub to catch the drip. Mother put a wash boiler of water over the fire to heat, soaked the empty barrel with hot water until it was tight again, then poured in the molasses from the other barrel together with what had leaked into the tub. Father had a spigot but no sugar to bore a hole for it near the bottom of the barrel. So he put a rag around it and drove it in the bung hole, then all hands rolled it down into the vegetable cellar and set it in one corner by the door where it would be handy to get at, and father says, "Now we will be sure of that much of our sorghum." But he was wrong again, for in coming out after placing the barrel, the door was left open and my baby sister found her way down there and turned the spigot handle and before any of us knew it, all the sorghum in that part of the barrel above the bung hole had run out on the cellar floor and under the pile of vegetables stored there. They had to be taken out and the molasses scrubbed off and laid in the sun to dry and the cellar had to be dug about two or three inches deeper to get rid of the molasses that had soaked into the dirt floor.

Now everything was ready, and we put the vegetables back in the cellar but daddy didn't want to run any more chances of loosing the rest of the sorghum, so he got a large demijohn that he used to haul water from the river for home use, that he didn't use for that purpose any longer, an we had recently dug a well. He said "We'll fill that and set it in the corner of the bedroom where it will be 22 easy to watch." There was just enough to fill it, and it was set in the corner by father and mother's bed and father said "It surely will be safe there, and we still have enough left for winter use." But alas, daddy was wrong again, for one night not long after, there was an explosion like the firing of a gun or the bursting of a bomb. Of course everybody jumped out of bed, to land half way to their ankles in

Library of Congress

sorghum molasses. The demijohn was in thousand or more pieces and molasses was all over everything in the house, even dripping from the ceiling. Our clothes, bedding and hair was smeared and poor father's beard was matted with it. But father didn't say any cuss words, he simply said "well, well, this surely is too bad." We didn't go back to bed that night, and we want to house cleaning, which lasted for several days before we got rid of the last of the molasses. Father said "well I am glad that is all over, and that is the last of the molasses." But dear old dad was wrong again, for some of the horrible stuff had gone through the cracks in the floor, and soon began to mould and smell, so we had to move things out of the room, take the floor up, dig the dirt out that the molasses had soaked into, scrub all the boards and replace them before the molasses deal was finally finished.

Mother decided if we did not eat the eggs on account of the rotten onion flavor, we would have to eat the hens, so she cooked a nice fat one, and made corn dumplings with it, but nobody could stomach the rotten onion taste that it had. So there was the milk, 23 butter, eggs, and chicken dinners "gone with the wind." Father said we'll have to have something beside vegetables to eat, so he decided to butcher the cow. She had gone dry anyway (probably because of eating so many onions) and was nice and fat and would make prime beef and enough to last all winter.

We children all shed a few tears when Old Broch was killed, for she was a family pet, but we had to have something to eat. That was the day before Thanksgiving, and the next day mother planned a real Thanksgiving feast — a large roast of meat with potatoes and carrots laid around it. Something we had not had for years. But there was a peculiar odor that filled the house while it was cooking. Mother said she might have spilled something on the stove which in burning, caused the stench.

The table was set and the roast brought on and how delicious it looked, and father, after giving thanks for the prosperous year and the many blessings that we had enjoyed, carved the roast, placing a liberal helping of meat, carrots and spuds on each plate. Mother took a bite and looked at father; he took a taste and looked at us kids. I took a mouthful and my

Library of Congress

stomach heaved, and horrors of horrors, there was that familiar taste of rotten onions. So our dinner was entirely spoiled and all we had to eat was johnny cake straight with nothing to put on it or go with it. Still father did not say any cuss words and though sorely tried, was still able to say “well, well, that surely is too bad.”

24

Well we took the remains of Old Broch and buried them out in the field, and my little sisters laid flowers on her grave. Father decided then and there to quit farming, and although this all happened over 60 years ago, to this day I just can't say that I'm very crazy about sorghum or onions.