A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A PIONEER

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TV shows like Little House on the Prairie and When Calls the Heart have glamorized the life of the pioneers. Moving West sounded exciting and easy with the passage of the Homestead Act of 1862 and 160 acres of "free" land. People were poor, dispossessed and just plain tired of what life had given them. The Civil War was over and starting all over again made sense. Greed was another significant factor with the feverish lure of gold in 1859. Not all who came were poor, some were well off and just wanted adventure.

The trip was dangerous. Many unburied bodies or freshly dug graves were found along the trails. The trip by wagon train from St. Louis or St. Joseph, Mo to Denver City took 6-8 weeks to travel. Hundreds of the gold seeker 59ers died of starvation, lack of water, snake bites, disease and Indian attacks. Wagon trains in a hurry didn't stop to bury dead but pressed on to the gold fields. In 1859 100,000 59ers came to Colorado with thousands passing through Douglas County. It is estimated that half of the 59ers gave up hope of striking it rich and went home. The Gold rush was over by 1861 when Colorado became a territory. The territory divided into 17 counties and ended up with a population of 40-50,000 after the end of the gold rush. One thousand settled in Douglas County.(2) The number of men to women was 2 to 1, so women were in high demand. Many women married men much older (up to 20 years) than them and many of them married at 14 or 15 years old. Since birth control wasn't available many women had 6-14 children, many who did not live.

Most of those 1,000 lived in the western part of the county along its waterways. Most early settlers engaged in agricultural pursuits – farms, cattle ranches and saw mills. Life was much more difficult than originally advertised thanks to grasshopper invasions, hailstorms, drought and the settlers lack of experience in such an arid climate (so cruel was the promised land that it offered less than a mere foot of annual rainfall) as well as possible encounters with restive Native Americans. People had no idea of the crushing hardships they would face and how strong they needed to be. (2)

You don't see it mentioned but there is also less oxygen in the higher dry air and there's the bright piercing sun. Remember they were also leaving almost everything near and dear to them.

In Colorado's arid climate 160 acres were not enough to ensure a families survival. Most farms were small ranging from 5 to 40 acres. Many were subsistence farms that barely sustained a family from one year to the next. The county's high altitude posed a huge risk factor for farming since most of the migrants came from a much lower elevation where the growing season was about twice as long as Colorado's. Short season crops were eventually developed for this area, but many farms failed prior to them being available.(2)

Livestock needed supplemental feed for 7 to 8 months of the year which was almost impossible for a small acreage farm to provide. Most of the tilling of the soil was done by hand or small horse-drawn implements. Even when farmers were able to obtain better implements to increase productivity, many small farmers couldn't afford them, or the additional draft livestock needed to operate them. Small farmers often had to sell out to larger neighbors. Even the more successful farmers were always looking for a steady income to sustain them between harvests or the annual selling of cattle. Since virtually everyone raised chickens for fresh meat and eggs and kept a cow for milk as well as gardens for vegetables, they sold any surplus beyond the family need to generate much needed cash. (2)

Mountain runoff did not provide most Douglas County streams with enough water for irrigation resources. Through a process of trial and error successful settlers were those who found the right methods, soil and water resources that could support their specialties.(2) Jacob Dowlings introduction of alfalfa in 1862 was a boom to farmland productivity.(1)

Locally Plum and Cherry Creek bottomlands were the closest spots in Douglas County to what one might call a farmer's bonanza. Early on crops of garden vegetables, especially beets and all manner of feed and food grains proliferated. The potato reigned supreme for 30 years until severe winters and then a blight took it down.(1)

In 1868 3,000 acres of land were under cultivation along Plum Creek. Large farms might have included a post office, blacksmith and general store.(1)

Dryland farming techniques worked well for early well positioned settlers. For long term prosperity however, water storage, drainage and a distribution system were required. Ditches were merely band aids as streams were intermittent and unreliable, especially by midsummer. Highline Canal (1883) and Castlewood Canyon Dam (1890) were initial answers.(1)

In 1870 a Douglas County family's non-fowl meat diet primarily consisted of pork, venison, or once in a great while, buffalo. The only domestic beef to be had was the lanky longhorn, generally a very tough chew. People avoided it because they feared it was infected with Texas fever. 1865 brought the short blooded breed beef stock to the county. Herefords (white face) were brought in early 1870 and were vigorous, docile, fast growing with great foraging ability and longevity. This revolutionized the beef market in Douglas County.(2)

Some pioneers chose to specialize in dairy farming, creameries and the grains and silage to support their herds. By 1870 dairying was the county's largest industry. Eight dairies operated at the century's turn. In 1900 the annual Douglas County butter production exceeded 750,000 lbs.(1) Annual cheese production was 300,000 lbs. (2)

Elevation and greater precipitation (than Denver) in Douglas County made for a treasure trove of forests. The old growth yielded critical lumber needed in large quantities by buildings, the railroads, quarries, miners and other industries. Sawmills were common and often the most profitable businesses around. Railroads and Denver were growing rapidly and the wood prices rose accordingly. Little consideration was given to reforestation. The heyday of lumbering in Douglas County lasted only 3 decades.(1)

The quartz/feldspar family of rocks became a significant part of Douglas County's early economy. Wall Mountain tuff, Castle Rock rhyolite could be easily cut and crafted and led to commercial

quarrying ventures. Though the rose-colored rock lent itself to easy shaping, Portland Cement replaced it as the preferred building material. At the end of an era, some 30,000 railcar loads of rhyolite had been shipped from Castle Rock quarries to all points on the compass. The 1st National Bank of Douglas County, The County Court House, the Castle Rock D&GR Railroad Depot, and the Keystone Hotel were all constructed with rhyolite.(1)

In 1896 William T. Lambert organized a family venture – an apple orchard on his ranch 2 miles West of Sedalia. He planted 28,000 trees, a combination of apple, cherry and plum. He also stocked 400,000 seedlings in the nursery. Using irrigation methods he learned in California he watered 200 acres with a windmill. The Lambert Orchard Company sold apple butter, cider and juice and prospered for many years until the weather and several years of severe frost ruined the great venture. The company dissolved in 1914 but the ranch operation continued to prosper. (6)

Life for the average person living in the 1800s was hard. Many lived a hand-to-mouth existence, working long hours in often harsh conditions. No electricity, running water, central heating. With no electric lighting (or gas) the rhythm of life revolved around the hours of daylight and therefore varied with the seasons.(4)

An outdoor structure was typically built as the toilet, however, an outside toilet or earth closet was a bucket dug in the ground where earth was used to cover waste could also be used. The bucket would be removed when full and disposed of elsewhere. Urine was collected in tins for use in the spinning and weaving industries. A chamber pot in the bedroom saved members from venturing out at night in the cold and dark and had to be emptied in the morning.(4)

The kitchen range or hearth burned coal or wood and was the only source of heat. At night someone might have to stay up and keep the stove burning. It wasn't unusual to wake up with ice on the inside of the window panes. At night a warming pan was filled with hot coals and placed in the bed and removed before the family went to sleep. Some families heated bricks and put them in the foot of the bed.(4)

For water people tried to live as close to a stream as they could. Some had to carry water from the neighbors, dig a well, make a holding pond, have a reservoir or cistern, or bring it from an irrigation canal. Many settlers kept a barrel, called a butt, to store rain water. (4)

After finishing their morning chores the family ate breakfast around 8-9 am. The food varied depending on what was available and in season. The mid-day meal was called dinner so the evening meal was called supper or tea and was usually lighter with cold bread, milk toast, frizzled (chipped) beef, oysters, fish, light cake, stewed fruit. Oysters? Yes railroads could bring them, they were inexpensive and they were suddenly served daily in large cities and small towns.(5)(6)

Just preparing the meals was not a light burden. Weighty iron vessels, cooking and bending over the hearth if you didn't have a stove. A woman's work is never done. They would have to collect water, it had to be heated; there was no refrigeration – a meat safe was used to keep food cool, somewhere where there was a cool breeze and damp cloth placed on top to help keep it cool; they might have a root cellar to store the vegetables. They had to make their own butter using a butter churn and paddles; salt and pepper had to be ground with a pestle and mortar. Food was preserved and made into jams and pickled or canned to last between seasons. Women dried fruit to use later for pies. The women also made the soap and the animal fat oil (tallow) for the lamps. The last rendering of lard after a pig was slaughtered was mixed with lye and water in an iron kettle to make soap. It smelled terrible and you had to stir it forever with a big stick until it cooked and you could let it cool and cut it into blocks of soap. The lye cut the grease. It was good soap and made your hair beautiful but was used mainly for dishes and clothes. They made starch from potato scraps.(4)(7)

The Women had to cook, chop wood, clean, grow a garden, wash and iron, take care of the children, care for the sick and elderly and make the clothes as well as sometimes help work in the field. In the garden they usually grew potatoes, cabbage, parsnips, beans. The

Indians taught the settlers a method of planting squash, beans and corn, so these were popular.(4)

Clothes were homemade from linen or cotton cloth the family bought. Women wore floor length print dresses of gingham or calico with long sleeves, even in summer, with a white apron and bonnet. Aprons were used to keep the dress clean and were used to carry items. The long sleeves and bonnets kept women's skin white, which was desirable. In fact, early settlers tended to be covered from head to foot in clothing since they couldn't afford to be exposed to intense sunlight and wind for 12 hours a day. They used to wear long underwear even in the summertime and broad brimmed hats to protect their faces and bandanas to protect their necks. The clothes protected them from the heat, like in the desert, and also kept in their odor. There were no zippers at that time, so there were lots of buttons, no back pockets, no belt loops, no open necklines and no collars on shirts. Women bought patterns and fabric at the dry goods store but men bought their pants, usually made of wool of linen ready made. Clothing wasn't sized so often people wore ill-fitting or oversized clothing. It was easy to determine who was prosperous and who wasn't. Clothes were altered, mended and patched until completely worn out and then they were made into rag rugs. Rugs were an important feature of the cottage, providing some protection from the cold stone or ground floors. That's why you don't see working class people's clothes in museums. As with food, nothing was wasted and everything could be reused or recycled in some way. Knitting was also an important skill. Shawls were knitted to help keep cold weather at bay. Boys and girls, as early as 4 years of age, were taught to knit, but as they grew up knitting became a woman's job. It took an experienced sewer 15 hours to hand stitch a man's shirt, the invention of the sewing machine cut that time to 1 ½ hours.(4)(7)(8)

On laundry day, which took all day, the ladies had to heat at least 58 buckets of water that they had to bring in and built a fire under to heat and then put the clothes in and twisted and turned by hand using a wooden dollie, a flat disk mounted to a long wooden handle, for 45-60 minutes. They grated a bar of homemade soap to create

soap flakes which they added to the water. It took 2 loads to get all the washing done with both loads using the same tub of water. Less dirty or whites washed in the first and mucky work clothes in the second. A rubbing board with ribbed wood or metal is used to help push the soap thru the material and get the dirt out after soaking and stirring it. Rinsing is done in a second washtub. After rinsing the clothes are put thru a mangle with 2 rollers to squeeze out the water to help them dry quickly. Clothes were then hung outside. Not everything could fit into one washtub so this labor intensive process was repeated all day until done. The next day, usually Tuesday was ironing day. Flat irons were heated up on the kitchen range, if you had one, and it was a slow and physically demanding job. Many people probably didn't iron. (5)

Houses could be a many different styles – a sod hut, a wood or log house, a small one room cottage of brick, rhyolite, sandstone or clay. The beds were typically wood bed frames with the mattress held up by a criss-cross of ropes. The mattress was a large cloth sack or tick that could be filled with dried grass, wool, or feathers. Straw and hay filled mattresses had to be emptied and refilled each year. There would be a homemade table, a few broken down chairs, and a bed with one kerosene lamp and some candles, although they were seldom used because the fireplace threw enough light in the small cabin.(7)(8)

People bathed in the rivers and streams or used a galvanized tub that used heated water and several people used the same water. Washing hands and faces was done by using room temperature water in a pitcher and bowl or metal pan and pail. People typically used toothpicks versus toothbrushes. Plastic and nylon were not yet invented so if you were lucky enough to have a toothbrush it was one made with bone and boar bristles. Some people chewed on twigs or mint to freshen their breath. Commercial toothpaste was unavailable so people made up recipes for homemade powder using table salt, soap or chalk.(4)(7)

Education was important to many parents and schools were set up on personal ranches in many cases and many families had enough of

their own children to fill grades 1-8. Teachers were typically 16 to 18 year old girls just out of school and in some cases students were older than the teachers. All the students went to class in one room. It usually had a stove in the middle and benches for the students to sit on. The Sedalia school was part of the pioneer school district. Classes began in 1865 with a wooden school house being built in 1878. A second school and an addition to it was made in 1912, doubling its size. Religion was also important and many churches were built with St. Phillip in the Field Episcopal Church being completed and consecrated on November 5, 1889.(2)

Settlers had to go to the dry goods store for essentials they couldn't produce. They bought flour (100 lb bags), sugar (100 lb bags), lard (50 lb pails or tines), coffee and tea. They often brought their eggs and butter to trade for the essentials. People also bought material, rope, farm implements and whatever else the store might have that they needed and could afford. George Manhart built a store in Sedalia in 1889 and it also had a post office on the first floor. George and Betty Manhart lived behind the store until their 12th child was born. The grocery business made George a rich man with trade generating $3,500 a month. (9)

The railroads coming to Sedalia with 2 running through it, helped George's success. With the railroad it provided access to both basic and luxury items to be stocked on shelves of hardware and dry goods shelves. Such imports, i.e., oysters, connected county people to the rest of the country. Railroads carried US mail, shipped lumber from sawmills (Larkspur, Sedalia and Daniels Park and elsewhere), transported farms and dairy products to Denver and Colorado Springs. The rhyolite business flourished because the railroads built spurs to the quarries and railroad cars shipped tons of the lava stone daily to markets in Colorado, Wyoming, Nebraska and Kansas. The cattle industry relied on D&RG and AT&SF to take beef cattle to market. Before the train it took 7 days to move cattle to Denver and after the train they could move in a day. Trains were counted on to ship products and goods that the trains brought from afar were relished. The transition from the age of wagon trains and stage

coaches to the age of railroads changed lives dramatically. The trains also carried passengers. In the 1880s a trip from Denver to Colorado Springs took a little over 4 hours and from Castle Rock to Denver or Colorado Springs took 2 hours. Over 100 railroads had laid track before 1900 but most of them failed by the turn of the century. (2)

People lived a hard life and didn't have extra time, energy or money for extracurricular activities. However, settlers did go and visit neighbors and family whenever possible and they celebrated with family for holidays. Obviously children had toys and games they played. Rag dolls and corn husk dolls were popular and boys usually received their first knife at 4 or 5 years of age and started whittling. Some of the games you will recognize and have probably played, like marbles, hopscotch, spinning top, tug of war, hide and seek, foot races, jump rope (although they used vines for rope). Balls were made from a rock wrapped in yarn. Music was also a large part of the settler's lives. From playing the fiddle and spoons for dancing to singing hymns during church. There were no radios, headphones, or electricity so music was done by individuals. Waltzes, marches, religious psalms and anthems, folk music and ragtime were popular. Some of the popular songs were: A Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight; Hello My Baby; Turkey in the Straw; The Sidewalks of New York; The Washington Post March. Some songs are still being sung over 100 years later like: Amazing Grace; Joy to the World; Jingle Bells; Happy Birthday (Good Morning to All); and Red River Valley. We are social creatures and people joined organizations like the Masons, Odd Fellows, The Grange, Ladies Aid Society, Women's Christian Temperance Union. There were church activities, 4th of July band concerts, baseball games, parades, dinner/dances. The second floor of The Manhart Store was used for various community activities (including a Thanksgiving dinner and dance) and organization meetings. " By the turn of the century 1/10 of the counties population lived in Castle Rock but most still lived on farms, cattle ranches, and dairy farms. But Castle Rock had become the center for commercial, educational, political and social life. It provided a full range of goods and services needs by the rural

population. It was an enjoyable place to live and visit. There were many social activities: dances, picnics, strawberry socials, potlucks, hayrides, ice skating, sledding, ice cream."(2)

By 1890 a typical day's diet included meat, eggs, cheese, bread and vegetables. Each family had at least a small garden to grow vegetables and this would be their main source of food. Eating fresh fruit is really a 20th century thing. In the 1800s most fruit would have been preserved to get them through the winter. There was rarely if ever any surplus. Women could sell any extra garden produce, butter they had churned; butter could bring 40 cents a pound. Women frequently washed laundry, sewed clothes, sold eggs and chickens, sold milk, or ran a boarding house to help pay family bills. In 1890 most families income was around $500-$1000 annually. Wage earning families spent 40% of their income on food. In looking at wages in Colorado in various branches of manual and skilled labor it was higher in most instances than wages for similar vocations in other states. In fact Colorado led the world as a wage paying community with few exceptions. (3)

This physically demanding lifestyle took its toll and there was a high mortality rate at this time. This was due to a combination of factors including poor diet and lack of proper hygiene. Every pregnant woman faced a risk to her life. Experiencing complications during childbirth was one of the most common causes of death for women. Many children didn't live to their 5th birthday. Farmers and cattle ranchers learned how to conserve water use dry-land farming techniques, experimented with new crops; settlers got used to their life and flourished and found they loved the beautiful land and their neighbors. These rugged people of Douglas County made the necessary adjustments and have prospered.