

## THE PRAIRIE DOCTOR'S WIFE

(Continued)

*Pioneer Doctor's Wife, Omnipresent. Doctor's Children—Children's Dresses. Heating and Ventilation of Pioneer Homes. Low Ceilings. We Buy a Home. Pioneer Hospitality. Social Life. Wives Go to Medical Meetings—The Auxiliary.*

### PIONEER DOCTOR'S WIFE, OMNIPRESENT

It was sometimes necessary for the doctor's wife to arrange to send out fresh teams to cross-roads to meet him to save him from driving to town and then back again over part of the same road. It was a wonderful day for us, when rural telephones were installed, for it was often the means of getting in contact with the doctor when he was out on a case in the country, but at times it had its draw-backs. I recall one case in particular when he had a call to an obstetric case in which he was very much interested for it was his first contact with that family. I called and called, but got no response for this family was on a party line. I could hear them discuss a new apron pattern—the setting of hens and what they were preparing for dinner. Finally, when I was able to get my party, I was told he had gone four miles further north to see another case. Another doctor was called to the obstetrical case.

I think back on those days and wonder how a young mother could possibly do all that I did. Once each week the floors of that office were carefully scrubbed with a good solid scrubbing brush. This scrubbing was done on hands and knees in the early morning—before patients began to arrive. Then I proceeded to my own housework. In the midst of washing, ironing, baking, or cleaning, that office doorbell sounded, and everything was dropped. I

### THE PRAIRIE DOCTOR'S WIFE

smoothed my hair, straightened my apron, and dashed for the office to receive the patients. These constant interruptions delayed my housework particularly on Saturday, when the farmers came to town. One of my daughters recalls many Saturday afternoons when she was bathed and dressed and placed upon the kitchen table away from mischief, while mother scrubbed the kitchen floor and watched the evening supper cook on the one burner kerosene stove at the same time! That kitchen table was a treasure and could tell some tales of pioneer surgery if it would. It was six feet long and about two and one-half feet wide and had been the all important piece of furniture in my husband's first office, where it served as operating table, or patient's couch, etc., as occasion demanded. When he reached the stage of financial prosperity which enabled him to buy a proper office examination chair, I was only too glad to have this as an addition to my meagre kitchen furniture.

### DOCTOR'S CHILDREN

The office in the home was in many ways an unfortunate thing for the doctor's children. The father came in for his hurried meals with not even a walk from the office in which to throw off his cares. His naps were snatched between calls on the couch in the living room and the children soon learned to be quiet at these times. Moreover with the office at the home, they received too much attention, particularly in a German community such as ours was, where the children of the doctor were treated with the same respect accorded to the minister's children.

After the children started to school, they considered it a treat to be taken with father on Saturday

### THE PRAIRIE DOCTOR'S WIFE

morning as he made his country calls, and it was a blessing to me to have them cared for. The country friends were pleased to see the doctor's children and made much of them. I remember once when the two



A Daughter in Sailor Suit.

older girls came home from a trip with their father to a German-Jewish family, and told how the old grandmother had reached up to the top shelf of the kitchen cupboard and brought down a jar of carefully hoarded hard candies which she passed to the

## THE PRAIRIE DOCTOR'S WIFE

doctor's children — while her own candy-hungry grandchildren looked on enviously.

I found a picture of the older children the other day and laughed to think how warmly they had been dressed; woolen underwear, (good red flannels) home knit stockings and mittens, woolen dresses, heavy calfskin shoes, heavy overshoes, and good warm outer garments made large enough so they could grow. These precautions were necessary. There were few sidewalks. School rooms were heated with big stoves—so that those children near the stove were too warm and those a few feet away too cold.

### HEATING AND VENTILATION OF PIONEER HOMES

We hear of lack of ventilation in these homes. There was no need to open a window. Houses were so poorly built that unless cloth was stuffed around the window frames, it was impossible to sit near them. After the evening meal, when there was no longer anyone going out, it was customary to throw a rug or old coat across the bottom of the doorway to keep out the wind. The family huddled about the heating stove in which a few lumps of soft coal were burning, but the real heat came from the cobs which the children kept piling into the stove. It was impossible for the women of today—accustomed to test ovens with thermometers—to imagine the difficulty of keeping an even heat in the kitchen stove to bake bread and cake. If you wanted to bake an angel food cake—and they baked some good ones then—you piled on a definite number of corn cobs every ten minutes. It kept all hands busy piling in the corn cobs, which were usually brought to the kitchen in bushel baskets or an old tin wash-boiler. Some peo-

## THE PRAIRIE DOCTOR'S WIFE

ple even had barrels back of the stove for this purpose. No matter how carefully these cobs were picked over there was a certain amount of husks and fine dust against which to contend. One winter when corn sold for eight cents a bushel, we burned corn on the cob for we thought it was the cheapest fuel we could get. It gave a very hot fire, but by spring we found that we had burned out the grate. It made a cheerful fire and the children enjoyed listening to the crackling noise when the corn was red hot. The older people shook their heads—it hurt to burn a food but it was a necessity in a new country which had no timber. We adapted ourselves to conditions and led a simple contented life full of service and high ideals in standards of living.

### LOW CEILINGS

Our homes were small in the beginning with low ceilings. The rooms upstairs often had only half height windows. In moving into our first house, a rented one, we were obliged to take off the upper ornamental part of the head end of the bed, to get it into the upstairs bedroom. The secretary in the office, we found was taller than the room, and so we had to remove the molding across the top of the case to get it in place. The only room which was kept warm over night was the office, and this in the middle west where winter temperatures often reach twenty below zero. The bedroom upstairs was cold as a barn. We conceived the brilliant idea of swinging a hammock above the six foot table in the office, and our first child slept in that hammock at night. We slept in the bedroom upstairs above the office and could hear the child's cry. Often one of us crept down to that room during the cold night and satis-

### THE PRAIRIE DOCTOR'S WIFE

fied ourselves that all was well with the child. Her bed in the daytime was a clothes basket in the kitchen. Sometimes a fire was built in the living room in the evening. Laundry work was done in the kitchen; no washing machine in those days—we rubbed clothes on the board. A clothes wringer was our first convenience.

### WE BUY A HOME

Before the end of the second year we had purchased a home on the main street; a twenty-two foot lot with a one-story house consisting of three rooms and a lean-to for a kitchen. We had a large kitchen range and the neighbors joked about the impossibility of finding room in that lean-to for that stove. But we found a way. The door was taken off and turned the other way to make room for this stove. In those days dry goods came in very large wooden boxes. One of these served as kitchen table with oil cloth to cover it. A shelf was placed above this for lamp and clock and the kitchen furniture was complete. There was not even room enough for a chair. The living room served as dining room and there was a couch in this room which was used as a bed when relatives visited us. We soon purchased a twenty-two foot lot on the north side of us for which we promised to pay two hundred and twenty-five dollars. We gave two notes, one for one hundred dollars, with interest payable in a year—another for one hundred twenty-five dollars with interest and payable in two years. Fortunately the man who sold us the lot was a lawyer who suffered from a nervous breakdown. His wife had inherited a fortune and demanded for him professional attention almost every night. This service paid for the lot.

### THE PRAIRIE DOCTOR'S WIFE

Before the second child was born, an office-wing was built on this north lot. We once more had a living room and home life was more private. Later the house was raised and this gave us bedrooms upstairs. When succeeding springs arrived, people were disappointed if they did not see a pile of lumber in front of the residence for another addition. The town wag said that we built on twenty-eight times, but he must have counted times when new sidewalks were



The New Home.

laid! Lots to the south of us were purchased until we had a lot 110 by 132 feet. This same story might be told of nearly all the homes of the pioneer settlers. By the time this home filled our dream of a big convenient comfortable home, the children were gone, we were getting old and faced with caring for a home much too large for us. The problem was solved by a young physician buying the old home with its office. We retained the south half of the lot on which we built a smaller more compact home.

Can you imagine what it meant to give up the

## THE PRAIRIE DOCTOR'S WIFE

home in which the three children had been raised ; a home, the center of all social activities for these children and ourselves, where children came to do their practicing for Christmas and other entertainments—a home always open to club, church or every organization?

### PIONEER HOSPITALITY

No matter what its size, there was always room in those pioneer homes for hospitality. We had plenty of bedding and always had ham and eggs and some kind of jam in the house—if not jam, we did have sorghum. This was the hospitality of pioneer life as lived by those doctors' families in the building up of the west.

The doctor's wife knew everybody, was a part of the community, and tried to make people feel that the doctor's family was willing to be of service to everyone. Our library, while not large, was freely used, by high school boys and girls and by adults.

### SOCIAL LIFE

Our own social life was always limited by the doctor's calls. Many years, the guests for Christmas dinner arrived, only to find that an emergency call had summoned their host and that he must hastily eat a bit of the turkey or goose and go off to usher a new life into the world or perhaps perform an emergency operation. As the family grew up, it was never possible for them all to go to an entertainment or social, for someone must stay at home to answer the office doorbell.

There was never much jealousy among the doctors and their wives in our town. We were friendly, but never intimate. In the earlier years the doctors did not take their wives along with them to the State Medical meetings. We remained at home to care for

## THE PRAIRIE DOCTOR'S WIFE

the home, hold onto the business and use this opportunity while he was gone to house-clean the office. We had the freedom of the place then.

### WIVES GO TO MEDICAL MEETINGS— THE AUXILIARY

Not until 1911 were the wives invited to go along and even invited to the banquet. It was my good fortune and perhaps the misfortune of the others, that I was seated at the speaker's table. I was sandwiched in on the program between two eminent doctors. My subject, "What a Doctor's Wife Should Be—Another Viewpoint."

Since then we have been invited each year and the wives look forward to the event. There is nothing which more quickly brings harmony in the medical profession than for doctors and their wives to know each other better. For that reason I have welcomed the Auxiliary of the American Medical Association which was formed in St. Louis in 1922. It fell to my lot to serve as the first president of the Nebraska Auxiliary and at the Washington meeting of the American Medical Association in 1927, I was elected a Vice President of the National Auxiliary. I consider the greatest good of these auxiliaries to be the friendships made and the interest aroused in the husbands' work, although the community services rendered by the Auxiliaries are not to be overlooked.

And now at the close of fifty-two years, as the wife of one of these doctors, (and the same doctor at that) with the office in the home all these years, with that home on the same location for all excepting two of these years, I can speak with real appreciation of the life of sacrifice and devotion that one doctor has given one community. Both of us have given our best!