

An Englishwoman Remembers Her First Illinois Winter (1848)

By 1830, the population of the United States had reached 12.7 million. Although some of this increase was due to the nation's high birth rate, European immigration accounted for a great deal of the growth in the Old Northwest. As Native American resistance to white settlement waned in the years following the War of 1812, more and more settlers flowed in to new states like Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. Illinois saw migrants flow in from the Erie Canal into the Great Lakes and others steamed up the Mississippi to settle its western counties. As a result, the population of Illinois nearly tripled from 1820 to 1830. Edward and Rebecca Burlend were tenant farmers who migrated to the United States from rural Yorkshire in 1831. They immediately settled into their homestead in Pike County in western Illinois. The description of their first winter there is told from Rebecca's perspective, but was transcribed and edited by her husband, Edward, in the 1848 pamphlet entitled A True Picture of Emigration: Or Fourteen Years in the Interior of North America.¹

During the time we were at lodgings we had felt ourselves dependent, and looked forward with anxious expectation to the time when we might again taste the sweets and independence of home, and those enjoyments which are only to be expected at one's fireside. That period had now arrived. We had indeed a house such as I have already described, but we had no furniture except two large boxes, two beds, and a few pots and cooking utensils; besides, our provisions were just finished. Till this time we had been using principally the remains of biscuits, &c., purchased at New Orleans. The first wants of nature must be first attended to: whether we had a chair to sit in or not, something to eat we must have. Our nearest neighbor lived about a half-a-mile from us, and were at least two miles and a-half from any place at which flour was sold; thither, however, my husband went, and as our money was growing scarce, he bought a bushel of ground Indian corn, which was only one-third the price of wheaten flour; it was there sold for thirty cents a bushel. Its taste is not pleasant to persons unaccustomed to it; but as it is wholesome food, it is much used for making bread. We had now some meal, but no yeast, nor an oven; we were therefore obliged to make sad paste, and bake it on our frying pan on some hot ashes. We procured a little milk of our nearest neighbor, Mr. Paddock, which, on account of the severe frosts that prevail in Illinois, we generally received in lumps of ice.

Thus we lived the first few weeks at our new estate. Hasty pudding, sad bread, and a little venison which we had left, were our ordinary food. The greater part of my husband's time was spent in cutting and preparing wood for our fires. About this time we made further purchases of a

¹ Sean Patrick Adams, ed., *The Early American Republic: A Documentary Reader* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 83.

cow and calf, for which we paid fourteen dollars, a young mare, which cost us twenty dollars, two pigs, and a shallow flat-bottomed iron pan, with a cover to it, to bake in. This is the common, and indeed the only kind of oven used in Illinois. It is vulgarly called a skellit. To make it hot it is immersed in glowing embers, the lid is then removed till the dough it put in; it is then replaced and ashes again thrown over it, till the cake is baked. Hence it will be perceived that a quantity of bread beforehand is unknown in Illinois: their custom is to bake a cake to each meal, which is generally very good; eggs and milk being so plentiful, are regularly used in their bread, along with a little celeratus to lighten it, whereby it becomes very rich and nutritive.

The Illinois settlers live somewhat differently than the English peasantry; the former have only three meals a-day; and not much variety in them: bread, butter, coffee, and bacon, are always brought to the table, but fresh meat is a rarity, and is never obtained as in England by going to a butcher for it. In Illinois the farmers all kill their own cattle, and salt what is not used immediately; sometimes, however, they distribute portions among neighbors, with the view of receiving as much again when they kill theirs. It is by no means uncommon for an old settler to have a couple of fowls, ducks, a goose, or a turkey to dinner; and generally speaking, everybody has plenty of plain good food...

Nothing can be more beautiful than a field of Indian corn in full blossom, and perhaps nothing in nature displays the munificence of Providence more strikingly than this matchless plant. In order to supply our cattle with winter meat, we applied to Mr. Paddock, our nearest neighbor, who sold us part of a field unrealed; some of it we cut down and took home, the rest we allowed to stand and turned our cattle to it. The reader may think it strange that we should turn cattle into the fields in the depth of winter, especially as the winters are there more severe than in England; it is however the regular custom: the cattle are inured to it, as they are never kept up any part of the year, either day or night. The two pigs we had bought we were obliged to kill shortly after we purchased them, as we wanted them for our own use, and we wished to spare the small stock of Indian corn we had on hand. The reader must also know that our money was nearly done: I believe had not more than four or five dollars remaining; part of it we were obliged to spend in Sulphur, to cure what is called the Illinois mange, from which we were all suffering.

This complain invariably attacks new settlers, shortly after their arrival, and is a complete scourge until it is removed. The body breaks out all over in little spots, attended with intolerable

itching. It is generally attributed to the change of water, but as their possesses no peculiarity of taste, I cannot understand how that can be the cause. We were soon cured after using the Sulphur, and never felt anything more of it.

We have already seen that considerable labour is required to prepare fuel, as a good fire in America is essential during the winter season. The frosts are intensely keen, a wider river is sometimes iced over in a single night, so as to be unnavigable. Every thing of a fluid nature, exposed to the weather, is formed into a solid. For two or three months the milk freezing as soon as it is taken from the cows, affords no cream, consequently no butter. It is nevertheless possible to obtain butter, by keeping the churn near the fire, and churning cream and milk both together; but as this method is exceedingly troublesome it is seldom practiced. The nights in winter are at once inexpressibly cold, and poetically fine. The sky is almost invariably clear, and the stars shine with a brilliancy entirely unknown in the humid atmosphere of England. Cold as it was, often did I, during the first winter, stand at the door of our cabin, admiring their luster and listening to the wolves, whose howlings, among the leafless woods at this season, are almost unceasing. These animals are numerous in America; and, unless the sheep be regularly folded, their depredations are extensively injurious, as they lacerate the throats of nearly all the flock; sometimes they also will seize young pigs, but as they fear the old ones, unless they are impelled by hunger, these animals are not much in danger. The timid submissive sheep is always their favorite prey. The reader will perceive we had not much intercourse with the rest of the world. For a while no one seemed to notice us, except Mr. B., our neighbor Mr. Paddock, and one Mr. Burns, who lived about two miles off (all are *Misters* in America.)...

In this manner we spent our first winter; we had plenty of work; our amusements even tended to advantage. Great numbers of quails frequented our home-stead to feed on our small stock of Indian corn; we caught several of them with snares, which were excellent eating. My husband also shot few rabbits, of which there are vast numbers in America. We likewise saw several deer, but as we had no rifle, we could not kill any. We observed several kinds of birds, which we had not before seen, one in particular, which we took to be a species of turkey, engaged our attention; my husband tried several times to kill one, without effect. One Saturday, however, he was successful, and brought home his game with as much apparent consciousness of triumph, as if he had slain some champion hydra of the forest. The following day we expected Mr. B., who by this time had received his money, to dine with us. We accordingly dressed our

bird, and congratulated ourselves with the idea of having our countryman to dine with us on fine boiled turkey. Sunday morning arrived, and in due time our turkey was in the pot boiling for dinner. Mr. B. came; we told him how happy we were on account of the treat we were going to give him. He was surprised at our story, as those birds are difficult to obtain with a common fowling-piece, and desired to see the feet and head. But the moment he saw them, he exclaimed "it's a buzzard," a bird which, we subsequently learnt, gormandizes any kind of filth or carrion, and consequently is not fit to be eaten. We were sorely disappointed; our turkey was hoisted in the yard and we were obliged to be contented with a little bacon, and a coarse Indian corn pudding, for which our stomachs were not altogether unprepared, although recently in anticipation of more sumptuous fare. The reader may think we were stupid not to know a turkey; the bird in question is very much like one, and indeed on that account is called in Illinois a turkey-buzzard.

As spring approached we felt some symptoms of those hopes which had animated us in England with reference to our success as emigrants...