



## A Pioneer Mother

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Article Summary: Like other pioneer women, Ellis prepared meals, raised her children, stocked food for winter, nursed the sick, and sewed clothing.

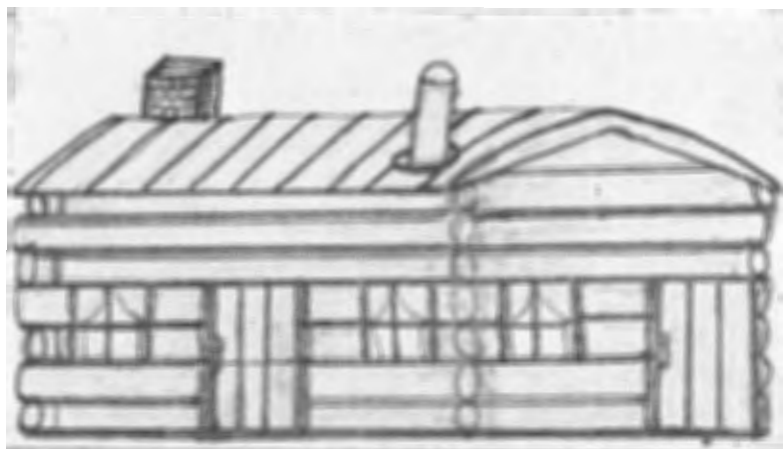
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Drawing by the author

### LOG CABIN ON THE ELLIS HOMESTEAD — 1869

## A Pioneer Mother

LILLIS L. RUSSELL, York

One year after the beginning of the Civil War, Hammond Ellis, a soldier under the command of Captain Taylor, was given an honorable discharge because of an injury received. He bade farewell to those with whom he had served in Company I, Third Regiment, Iowa Cavalry Volunteers, and returned to Centerville, Iowa, where he had settled on leaving his birthplace in Delaware County, New York.

It was here that this enterprising young man of English descent, then twenty-three years of age, was attracted to Rachel Ann Evans, a comely, dark-haired, blue-eyed maiden. She was the eldest daughter of the Reverend Jesse Evans, who, with his family, had emigrated from Bellton, West Virginia, in 1856.

Rachel Ann Evans became the bride of Hammond Ellis in March, 1862. From the age of fifteen, with the aid of her father, she had known the responsibilities of a household and a family of six brothers and sisters, her mother having passed away two years after their arrival in Iowa. Coming of a sturdy pioneer stock, she possessed an inherent sagacious thrift. Through her veins flowed a mixture of bloods. Daniel Evans, her grandfather, was Welsh; her grandmother was Dutch. From her mother, Mary Ferguson Evans, she received the combination of Scotch ingenuity and an Irish sense of humor—humor which had a way of appearing in her quick smile of understanding. By nature, Ann (as she was known by her friends) was very quiet, with typical New England reserve. Her cultured mind was acquired, no doubt, through the teachings of her father. Ann was stern in the choice of literature for her own family. A copy of

"Ten Nights in a Bar-Room," which somehow had crept into the household, quickly found a resting place in the kitchen stove.

The Reverend Jesse Evans was the second son of Daniel Evans, who had served in the War of 1812. Daniel was born in Baltimore, Maryland, about 1790; came to Pennsylvania when still a young man, married about the year 1815 and lived in Washington, Pennsylvania, where his second son Jesse was born on August 3, 1818. Though no records have been located to corroborate the story, a tradition held through generations is that Daniel Evans, known to have been a devout Methodist, is the grandson of John Evans, born in Baltimore, November 30, 1734, of parents who were members of the Church of England. Records of the New England Methodist Historical Society show that John Evans and wife embraced the Methodist faith; that the first Methodist meeting in America was held in his home in 1764, directed by Robert Strawbridge, who was sent to America by John Wesley to establish Methodism. From that time on the home of John Evans became the meeting place of Methodists and continued so for forty years. Then they were transferred to the home of Daniel Evans, the son of John and (presumably) father of our Pennsylvania Daniel. Here the meetings were continued for fifteen years, when a modern and beautiful church replaced the residence meeting-place and was called the Evans Church. Embury, a Methodist minister, is given credit by some as having established the first Methodist Society of America in New York, but authentic records show that while Embury came to America prior to the time Robert Strawbridge came, he did not establish Methodist meetings until 1766, two years after the Baltimore Society was established. However, the relationship of John and the two Daniels is traditional history, only.

In 1821 Daniel, Ann's grandfather, removed from the city of Washington to the southwest corner of what is now Green County, Pennsylvania. Here he purchased a large timber farm, where he cleared the timber, made a home and raised a family of eight sons and seven daughters; a second marriage gave him three additional sons. Green County at that time was a dense forest with no roads—only trails which were made by blazing trees through the timber. At the present time a lineal descendant lives on the old place which borders the little village of Boardtree.

When a lad of sixteen, adventure beckoned to Jesse Evans. He ran away from home to work on a steamboat that carried cannon to Florida for the purpose of driving the Seminole Indians from the swamps. Later a professional career appealed to him and he became an ordained minister in the church of God. After a time he purchased a farm near Belton, West Virginia, just across the state line from the old home place. Here he farmed during the week and preached the gospel on the Sabbath day. It was on this farm that his eldest daughter, Rachel Ann, was born October 31, 1842.

With the ending of the Civil War the adventurous lure of the Great Plains west of the Missouri River brought a wave of migration from the

eastern states. To a caravan of prairie schooners that halted in Center-ville, Iowa, September 1, 1869, were added others, among which was one carrying Hammond and Rachel Ann Ellis and their four children. Their prairie schooner was drawn—not by lumbering oxen, but by a sturdy team of mustangs, the type brought to this country by Cortez, one of the first Spanish explorers. The mustang was ideal for this journey, being blocky, small, and quick of movement, with the stamina to withstand long, wearisome journeys.

After crossing the ferry at Nebraska City (which had sprung up on the old Fort Kearny site), their first legal transaction involved the question of homestead rights. Their location took them on west one hundred miles. Arriving with two other families at the designated spot in the wild, wide stretches of unbroken prairie, they had the thrill of seeing a distant herd of buffalo. Soon afterward an encounter with a stray band of Indians gripped their hearts with fear. It was around their campfire in the gloom of the settling night. A band of Indians beating tom-toms and chanting a weird cry circled their camp on horseback. It seemed to be a warning only, for, after a few minutes of demonstration they departed with no damage done.

Now they were real pioneers in a land of hostile Indians, a land where a strong mental attitude as well as physical strength were needed. Aside from their canvas covering, here they were with only the immensity of the blue sky for a roof and the rolling prairies for a floor. Undaunted by the wilderness, they lived in the happy thought that some day, somehow, this would be home with all the comforts of the East, with beautiful trees and wealth from the soil.

With winter just in the offing, the first serious consideration was the building of living quarters. Would it be a dugout in the side of a hill? Would it be of sod? No! It would be built, they decided, from logs—logs that the three men would cut and hew from trees growing on the banks of the Blue River, one mile south of their staked-out homestead: a location which later was designated as Hays Township, York County, Nebraska.

Six weeks later they viewed their handiwork with much pride: a two-room log cabin sixteen by twenty-eight feet. A very humble affair, but it meant home. It was the first log cabin in this vicinity and the second in York County. Soon afterward the government forbade the cutting of river trees. Settlers who came later were forced to take their choice of a dugout or a sod house.

The water for the Ellis homestead was carried from the river for some time until a well of the "old oaken bucket" type was sunk, and this in time gave way to a windmill.

There was much to learn in this new country. Wild herbs were gathered and cured for medical purposes. Buffalo meat was plentiful and equal to any beef; the tallow was made into candles and the "chips" furnished fuel.

One thrilling experience which the younger children never tired of hearing was an early-day episode narrated by Ann. Hammond had gone to Nebraska City for supplies—a journey that would take several days. Ann, alone with the four small children, with the nearest neighbor a mile away, kept a weather eye out for Indians. Rumors of Indian depredations to the northwest were constantly in the air. Off guard for the moment, Ann was panic-stricken when in stalked four huge Indians. Ignoring Ann and the children, they took possession of the four chairs. In stoical silence they withdrew glittering bowie knives from their shields and proceeded to sharpen them. In Indian jargon they conversed, occasionally gesturing toward Ann, who stood facing them by the little four-paned window, gazing out on the prairie landscape. She waited with outward composure but a heart frozen with fear as the minutes ticked away like so many hours. Finally the Indians rose and departed as abruptly as they had come.

Ann was called upon many, many times to serve as nurse in cases of sickness. With no doctor within reach she would take charge, giving as much time as possible; then, leaving directions, would depart to attend to her own home duties, returning in a few days to encourage and help back to health those not so strongly constituted. Her fertile mind and nimble fingers designed and sewed by hand all the family's clothing. Those not so clever with the needle often appealed to her for assistance. This she never refused. Patiently she would cut and demonstrate and sometimes help in sewing garments for those whose ability did not lie in that direction.

Scattered groups were brought together for Sunday school, and the Sabbath day was strictly observed as a day of rest. Stretching pennies to cover meager supplies that must be purchased at intervals in Nebraska City, was a feat to equal that of any magician.

The depredations of coyotes and horse thieves were among the problems that pioneers had to face. Among them lived a very doubtful character who was suspected of being the leader of the gang. He it was who collected the loot and passed it on to others in a distant locality where it could be safely sold and the proceeds divided. At last he was caught red-handed. An enraged group determined that he deserved hanging. They gathered one evening, tied their handkerchiefs below their eyes, and were ready to depart to the home of the culprit.

It was then that Ann took a hand. She argued with them that to commit this deed would place them in the same class as the thief for whom they held such scathing contempt. Why not just pretend, she reasoned, that they meant to leave him on the wrong end of the rope? It would frighten him and he would leave the vicinity. This they agreed to do and did. Their orders to leave the country, when the rope "slipped" and his feet again touched the ground, were instantly obeyed. He never returned.

In the early seventies a man who knew the mason's trade came to visit in the vicinity of the Ellis homestead. He was adept in making adobe fireplaces. So to their tiny home was added an adobe brick fireplace. It was built out from the wall about two feet. When snow was deep across the fields this fire gave a cheery comfort within, though the fuel that fed the flames consisted mostly of cornstalks. Back of the fireplace and below one of the small windows was a built-in seat. To occupy this seat on stormy days was the height of the children's ambitions. Ann found it most interesting to watch the strategy in which they indulged when vying with each other for the coveted place. Sometimes Ann settled the difficulty by budgeting time.

In the year 1881 the log cabin was deserted for a new and commodious frame house. Though modernized, it is still in the possession of a son, John C. Ellis, on the original homestead.

Such was the everyday life of Hammond and Rachel Ann Ellis, carried on unassumingly through the progress of the years. Their lives were typical of the average pioneer: the type that made possible, really, the settling of the new West.



Photo by the author

THE ELLIS HOME IN 1881

In the history of Methodism as written by Lubbock and Hutchison we find this tribute:

"The picture of pioneer drama would not be complete without the mother of the new West. Mute testimony of how hard the early life was on the woman of the family is found in the hundreds of graveyards. She fed her men, raised her children and stocked up food for winter, drying for winter use the over-supply of vegetables raised. She was butcher, baker and candlestick maker all in one. It was she who kept religion alive, she who became the nucleus of the circuit-rider's church."

Hammond and Rachel Ann Ellis were but one unit in the great pioneer legions of the West. Brave, persevering, self-sacrificing, dependable, they possessed courage to carry on and to hold the homestead in spite of innumerable discouragements. They were rewarded in after years by a comfortable home with beautiful trees in a velvety bluegrass lawn; by broad meadows of clover and alfalfa, rich fields of corn and wheat. This country where they passed their last happy years, where they had reared ten children, was a country they had helped to create: their very lives were woven into the warp and woof of it. Builders of the West, indeed!

And of such was the Pioneer Mother.