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Article Summary: Pound lists customs practiced since the nineteenth century in Nebraska. Some she remembers, others have been described to her.

Scroll Down for complete article.

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Customs Described: Fourth of July, political rallies, curfews, Hallowe'en, Christmas, New Year's, Easter, Arbor Day, May Day, Decoration Day, birthdays, weddings, shivaree (charivari), infare (infair), funerals, whiskers, pound parties, church dinners, socials (sociables), literary societies, spelling bees, dance parties, play-parties, theatricals

Old Nebraska Folk Customs¹

Louise Pound

The customs to be recorded here are from the 19th century, though most persist into the 20th and are, indeed, familiar to the majority of us today. Some have been noted from as far back as the 1850's, when Nebraska was still a Territory. It became a State in 1867. Most were gathered from comparatively late in the century. All are really much older than their appearance in Nebraska; in the main they are legacies from the British Isles or from the European continent. That they still exist among us is, however, no reason for excluding them. The Fourth of July celebrations and the political rallies seem those customs most indigenous to the United States; but of course political or civic festivities of much the same type have existed elsewhere, associated with other occasions.

As regards sources, a large part of what I have recorded derives from my own recollection or is of my own assemblage from oral sources. In the days when I was interested in folksong, its origin and transmission, I liked, for some reason, to gather other folklore matter as well, perhaps as background. But I owe very much to many individuals, notably to Dr. Ruth Odell, Mrs. A. H. Rulkoetter, Mari Sandoz, Grace Tear, and to student contributors, such as Ruth Milford, Florence Kellogg, Josephine Hyatt, Jeanne Allen, and others too many to name. Testimonies concerning frontier days I owe to various newspapers and documents, Territorial and later, preserved in the Library of the State Historical Society. My assemblage can hardly be exhaustive, but it is as nearly such as I could make it.

¹Read in part at the Sixth Annual Folklore Conference at the University of Denver, July 11, 1946.

The customs regarding which I have gathered materials may be grouped for convenience under these headings: Civic Customs; Customs for Special Days or Occasions; Social Activities; Sports; Literary, Debating and School Activities; Singings; Play-Parties and Dances; Theatricals and Related Entertainment; Food; Addenda.

CIVIC CUSTOMS

Fourth of July

Among older civic customs, those of the Fourth of July may well take priority and should have treatment in considerable detail because of their historical place. Beyond question, the celebration of the Fourth was the great occasion of the year in Frontier days. Stock features were the program, the big dance or dances, and the dinner. The whole region around about was invited to attend and take part. Settlers thronged in, coming in wagons horse-drawn or ox-drawn, on horseback, or even on foot. At times the vehicles were decorated with green boughs or with flowers. Often there was a dance on the night of July third, sometimes one outdoors "on the green" on the afternoon of the Fourth, and nearly always a large dance that night. The Fourth might be ushered in by the firing of salutes, or the ringing of bells. Children set off firecrackers or torpedoes, after these were to be had at stores. At about ten o'clock there was a march or procession, sometimes with the escort of a military company, to a nearby wooded place or grove where the formal program was held.

Preparations were often very elaborate. The Brownville *Advertiser* of July 5, 1856, commented in its editorial column: "The Fourth Attendance from our own and adjoining counties of this Territory and Missouri was large . . . Vocal music under the supervision of Captain Thurber and Lady was fine as we ever listened to. The Declaration of Independence was read by Mr. Lake in a clear, audible and impressive manner." Of the Dinner it was remarked that "All the delicacies and substantials of the season weighed down the tables: Buffalo Meat, Venison, Barbe-

cued Ox, Roast Sheep, Hogs and Pigs enough to have fed the whole Territory." "Sentiments" and "responses" were delivered. In the evening there was a "Ball in McPherson's Hall, a new and commodious building rushed through to completion for the occasion" . . . "The 'fiddle and the bow', the 'merry dance' continued until toward the 'wee hours' when all repaired to the large room below, where C. W. Wheeler had prepared a supper" "The dance went on 'until broad daylight' . . ."

Of the Fourth of July celebration at Nemaha City, the *Brownville Advertiser* of July 2, 1857, in its Weekly Review column gave as the program: "1st. Vocal Music, American Ode—by the Choir. 2nd. Prayer—by the Chaplain. 3rd. National Glee—by the Choir. 4th. Reading of the Declaration of Independence—by A. D. Kirk. 5th. Freedom's Choice —by the Choir. 6th. Oration—by C. E. L. Holmes. 7th. Star Spangled Banner—by the Choir. 8th Remarks—by Invited Guests. 9th. Dinner. 10th. Toasts. 11th. Dance on the Green." On July 11, the same newspaper commented: "The celebration of the Fourth at our sister town Nemaha City was a grand affair—we say without hesitation it was the most magnificent affair of the kind we ever attended. The table was four hundred feet long, and perfectly groaned beneath the weight of eatables placed thereon. There were over two thousand persons present, and after all were abundantly fed, there was yet 'enough and to spare'. There was a grand attendance of the fair sex . . ." The celebration was held in the "new Hotel building." After the exercises, with numbers by the choir and an oration, there was a "dance on the green." In the evening "all hands adjourned to Brownville, where the merry dance was kept up . . ."

The *Nebraska City News* of June 25, 1859 announced that the "Nebraska Harmony Singing Association have made arrangements to give a Grand Ball and Supper including singing, reading the Declaration of Independence, etc., on July 4. The Sidney Brass Band has been engaged for the occasion."

The *Omaha Nebraskian* of July 21, 1860, has among its Territorial Items: "The Cass County *Sentinel* estimates

the numbers in attendance upon the Fourth of July celebration at Plattsmouth as from 1200 to 2000. Only two drunken men were in attendance." The same newspaper, July 7, 1860, tells of the Fourth at Omaha. The exercises "commenced at about nine o'clock by the presentation to the Hook and Ladder Company . . . of a magnificent ladder carriage." There was a presentation speech, a procession, an amateur band made music. At the grove there was the prayer, the reading of the Declaration of Independence, national songs were sung, an Oration was delivered, and cannon were fired at the close. There was a "small display of pyrotechnics in the evening."

At these celebrations the dinners and toasts came at noon. At Bellevue in 1854 the toasts offered were as follows: "The Fourth of July," "George Washington," "President and Acting Vice-President," "Spartan Mothers of the American Revolution," "The Union," "Nebraska," "Our Friends Crossing the Plains," "The Press," "Bellevue," "The Ladies." Next came nine volunteer toasts to various persons, including the Indian Agent and the ladies who made ready the food.

In Lincoln from early times onward the Fourth was celebrated in much the same manner. There was the usual prayer by a minister, an oration, the reading of the Declaration of Independence, and songs were sung. Indeed, there might be speeches all day long. In many places in later decades of the century there might be an initial parade, with a pretty girl as Goddess of Liberty leading the floats. Or there might be a militia parade, a band concert, or a flag pole dance.

Staple sports, when these made their appearance, were ball games, horse races, foot races, wheelbarrow races, sack races, obstacle races, three-legged races, potato races, fat men's races, donkey races, greased pole climbings and greased pig races. On the Fourth, sometimes on other days, men might spin silver dollars at a mark, occasionally half dollars or quarters. Children sometimes imitated them with dimes, nickels, and pennies.

Picnics were often planned for the Fourth. For these there was often a Marshal of the Day riding a horse, with

perhaps a large red scarf draped from shoulder to hip. Almost always at Peru, Nemaha County, a young girl, selected for her beauty, posed as the Statue of Liberty. Old Soldiers' Picnics were held on this day, sometimes on other days; at these reminiscences were called for. Or there was a big dinner or barbecue with buffalo meat, occasionally catfish, the main eatables. At night fireworks, mainly Roman candles, pinwheels and rockets, became a fixed custom. In the 1880's balloon ascensions were a frequent attraction.

In the later half of the 19th century, "water fights" were part of the day's entertainment on the Fourth, or perhaps on Memorial Day or at the County Fair. In towns too small to maintain full-time fire departments, fire protection was furnished by so-called Volunteer Fire Departments. These developed not only into fire-fighting organizations but also into social, fraternal, and insurance benefit societies. Water fights were staged between teams of two to four men against teams of like number. Each had a hose into which water was turned at top pressure. The object was to drive the opposing team over a certain line by water. Not only did the contestants get thoroughly soaked but very often the spectators. Lincoln had local competing teams in the 1880's.

The celebration of the Fourth of July was resumed in Lincoln in 1946, after having lapsed with the outbreak of the second World War. Out of town picnickers were present but there was no reading of the Declaration of Independence, no oration, no official prayer. There were qualifying trials for the Mid-West Championship automobile races, then the competitive races for \$2,500. One man was killed in these. A night show was given in front of the State Fair grandstand, revues and stage acts were presented by producers from Chicago, and carnival shows and rides on the Midway preceded the fireworks.

Political Rallies and Elections

Political Rallies were marked by torchlight parades. The marchers carrying torches wore rubber capes to pro-

tect them from sparks. If there was an evening program, it might be started off by Roman candles.

A testimony early in the present century from Hebron, Nebraska, told that when the polls are closed on Election Day, the clerk goes out on the main street and calls, "Hear ye, hear ye, the polls are now closed." This is the official closing. This custom was observed at Omaha and other places also.

Oysters were shipped into the Middle States in November, and sometimes there were Oyster Suppers at churches for those who came down town to learn the November election news.

Curfews

A curfew was tolled in Central City by the city fire bell at nine o'clock in the summer and at eight in the winter. This practice is not now followed. The children were told that they must be indoors when the curfew rang, or the town police would "lock them in jail." At McCook a nine o'clock whistle was sounded as a warning that "small girls should be at home in bed." This was true in Lincoln for a time. An eight o'clock curfew was reported from Fullerton and a nine o'clock from Fairbury.

SPECIAL DAYS AND OCCASIONS

Hallowe'en

Several old Hallowe'en customs are still existent pretty widely.

The Jack-o-Lanterns flashed in windows or at doors or hung on gate posts are far from obsolete. They are made of pumpkins hollowed out, with lighted candles placed inside.

So-called "tictacs," made usually of spools and cords and operated on windows, were used especially on Hallowe'en.

Still persisting is the sabotage by predatory children or young persons who often do real damage to property.

The handout—when two or more children ring the doorbell and expect eatables of some sort, usually apples or popcorn or cookies or candy, to be provided, or else (it is implied) reprisals are to be expected—is a fairly recent custom in Lincoln, but is really old. Possibly it was imported from other occasions during the year.

At Peru there was singing from house to house with “treats” for payment.

Christmas

Exchange of presents is an old custom.

So is the Christmas tree and the hanging of stockings. If evergreen trees were not to be had in early days, oak or other trees served. Their twigs were wrapped in cotton to make a “white tree” and sometimes the trees were strung with red cranberries. The children of the family might string popcorn balls on the tree, for the home or for the church. Strings alternating red cranberries and the popped white kernals were especially admired. Smaller family gifts went into the stockings, hung near a fireplace if there was one, and larger ones on the tree, or if there was no tree, they were placed at the breakfast table near a plate or in a chair.

At the home of a family in Peru, it was obligatory for the first one who said “Christmas gift” on Christmas day to receive a gift.

Plum pudding (one contributor wrote “plumb pudding”) was often served, over which brandy was poured. It was then carried burning to the table. Sometimes holly was stuck in the top of the pudding.

The singing of carols by groups of young persons came somewhat late. At times the groups went out at about five o'clock Christmas morning to sing such songs as “Silent Night,” “Joy to the World,” or “Merry Christmas to You” before the homes of their friends. Sometimes groups went out from a church, each group with a list of sick persons. A song was sung at a door, or a window for their benefit. As a rule those of high school or college age were the singers. The singing of carols nowadays is likely to be on Christmas Eve.

The sending out of Christmas cards which now so flood the mails established itself somewhat late. They were infrequently sent in the 19th century.

Churches, clubs and other organizations and private families give Christmas and Thanksgiving dinners to the poor and also give clothing or toys for the children.

The hanging of mistletoe to the chandelier is a well-known custom. A person caught under it may be kissed.

Midnight services on Christmas Eve are held at most Episcopal churches. There is a communion service with music. The Catholics hold high mass at midnight.

New Year's

New Year's Eve "watch parties" have been common from an early day.

Often New Year's Balls or Dress Balls or Masquerades were and still are held in cities on New Year's Eve .

New Year's calls were long a flourishing custom. Cards were left at the houses visited. Often wine or other drink was served to callers.

The sending out of fancy New Year's cards was popular in the 1890's.

"Snapdragon", so called, was served on New Year's, i.e., raisins spread on a platter with burning brandy poured over them, these to be seized from the platter with the fingers.

A few persons reported a custom of leaving the house door ajar on New Year's Eve, "to let out the old year."

Easter

No egg rolling has been reported from Nebraska. Perhaps this is a custom only at the Washington White House.

Eggs were often stolen from nests and hidden for weeks to be brought out on Easter morning.

Parents color eggs at Easter, the children sometimes helping. The eggs are hard boiled before being colored. They may be eaten sometime during the day.

Colored eggs are hidden in the yard under trees, bushes, on poles, under leaves covering the flower gardens,

etc. On Easter morning the children gather and hunt them. When they find the eggs they are told that "the bunnies laid them." Colored egg shells, candy eggs, rabbits and chickens are also sometimes so hidden.

Children exchange eggs as a token of friendship. Sometimes sentiments go with the eggs.

Sometimes the inside of the egg is blown out and the the egg gilded or colored. Sometimes the inside of the egg is taken out, a hole put in the ends of the egg and a ribbon inserted. These are either hung on doorknobs of houses or handed to children.

Children compete at cracking eggs. The one whose egg is cracked loses. A trick is to use an egg that is raw, not boiled, to win.

Several persons reported that "In our family we always say we'll try to see how many we can eat on Easter Day. We begin with eggs for breakfast and have eggs in some fashion for all the meals of the day."

Arbor Day

Arbor Day, a day set apart for the planting of trees or shrubs, was instituted by J. Sterling Morton of Nebraska City who was later the United States Secretary of Agriculture. On his motion, it was founded by the Nebraska State Board of Agriculture January 4, 1872. Prizes were offered by the Board for the best essay on agriculture and for the largest number of forest and fruit trees planted on Arbor Day. It was devoutly believed in those days that "rain follows the plow" and that the way to ensure more rainfall on the Western Plains was to plant more trees and to break more land. The day originally fixed upon was the second Wednesday in April, April 10, 1872. In 1885 the Nebraska legislature changed it to April 22 and made it a legal holiday. The first Arbor Day Proclamation was made by Governor Robert W. Furnas in 1874. Alabama, Maine and other States took up the Nebraska idea and by 1890 it had spread over the United States and, indeed, to other parts of the world. Its observance now comes late in April or early in May. It is still a legal holiday, though less widely observed. Schools recognize it by programs or ceremonies.

May Day

Except at colleges there are no celebrations with dancing about Maypoles. There used to be occasional flag-pole dances but these did not come in May.

One surviving May Day custom is the hanging of May baskets. Children hang the baskets on a front door, ring the bell or knock, and then run and hide lest they be caught. The baskets are prettily decorated boxes of bright colored paper filled with flowers or sometimes with nuts and candy, i.e., "goodies." One informant said "Children caught after hanging May baskets can be kissed." Of late, May baskets are sometimes taken about the houses of friends by some older person in an automobile.

Though no May Day celebrations were planned by towns there was often some sort of a celebration in schools.

Decoration Day

Most stores are closed on this day and graves are decorated with flowers. There may be a program of music and speeches and a street parade of veterans. Various services may be held in town or at the cemetery.

In Lincoln old cannon on the Capitol grounds were hauled out. These are not on the grounds now. Sometimes the fire engine was taken through the streets.

The commemorations of this day were always associated with the soldier dead or with the G. A. R.

Birthday Customs

In Southern Nebraska near Red Cloud and the Kansas line a neighborhood observed a birthday in a rather peculiar way. "It was unusual for a birthday to pass without a surprise party. Young and old gathered at the home of the family of the person whose birthday it was. As the high point of the party the unfortunate whose birthday was celebrated was thrown into the watering tank, usually none too clean. Cattle and horses might be frightened from their drinking as the shrieking person was tossed into the tank. Possibly this custom was of Kansas rather than of Nebraska origin."

It was the custom in some Nebraska towns to butter or grease the nose of a member of the family or a friend on his or her birthday. This was a Buffalo County testimony.

Occasionally it is the thing to pinch a person on the day after his birthday. Or, oftener, to pat or slap him on the back, or to paddle him, as many times as the years of his age "with one to grow on."

Gifts from the family were customarily placed under a person's plate at the breakfast table.

When a birthday cake is brought in, it is placed before the person whose birthday it is. On it are as many candles as the number of years of her life is supposed to be. If she blows out all the candles at her first trial she will be married within the year. If not, the number of candles left burning indicates how many years it will be before she is married.

Widely customary is the singing of "Happy Birthday to you," by those about the table, at the entrance of a person whose birthday is announced.

It was a pioneer custom for the mother to hold a child on each of its birthdays and rock it like a baby. A contributor testified that her mother always sang to her on such an occasion the lullaby she sang to her children when infants, Dr. Watts' cradle hymn "Hush my dear, lie still and slumber."

Weddings

A familiar old custom is the shower of rice which usually takes place at the depot as the bride and groom depart by train. If they leave in a car, the shower comes as they leave the house.

The tying of an old shoe to the baggage, or of a white slipper, is supposed to bring good luck.

The bride throws her bouquet as she comes down the stairs to go away. The girl who catches it is supposed to be the next to be married.

A penny, a thimble, and a ring are baked in the wedding cake. The person getting the penny is to be wealthy, she getting the thimble will be a spinster, and the getter of the ring will be a bride.

The carriage, car, taxi, or automobile in which the newly married are leaving is placarded to let the public know of the wedding and bring embarrassment to the couple.

The saying that a bride should wear—

Something old, something new,
Something borrowed, something blue.

is not merely lore but is a custom religiously carried out by present-day brides.

In earlier days the "genteel" always had home weddings. In some rural sections there were no ordained ministers. The local justice of the peace often officiated. "The bride always had to have two dresses. Her second day dress, so-called, was to wear at the 'infare', which was always held at the home of the groom while the wedding was in the bride's home. The traditional gift of a farmer to a daughter was a cow."

"At some Bohemian weddings of Northern Nebraska, it is the custom to decorate the bridal car with streamers of the bride's chosen colors. The bridal party usually drives to the county seat for the marriage. The car with its gay decorations attracts immediate attention. Free dancing for the community is part of the wedding festivity. The town hall is frequently rented for a big free dance."

"A curious custom was followed till recent times in the German-Russian settlement at Lincoln. At the wedding dance the bride was the center of attention. She danced, not with her husband, but with other men. Each man who danced with her was expected to pin on her dress a bill. The money she collected in this strange way was used to pay the bridegroom, who customarily advanced the money for the bride's wedding finery. Feasting was another feature of the dance."

The Shivaree

In frontier days a wedding was always followed by a shivaree (charivari), and the custom is far from extinct. The shivaree took place at dusk or later, on the day of

the wedding, or sometimes in the evening of the next day, at the new home of the couple. Friends or young people of the neighborhood gathered to serenade the bride and groom with the beating of tin pans, oyster cans, the ringing of cowbells or sleigh bells, with whistles, the blare of horns, firecrackers or shooting, or the utilizing of any other noise-making devices that might be available. This was kept up till the young couple appeared before the serenaders to treat the crowd. The crowd might be asked into the new home to be served pumpkin pie and watermelon or other eatables; or the groom might hand the men cigars. One contributor testified that sometimes he might actually "buy off" the boisterous crowd. Others doubted this. Another contributor wrote as follows:

I distinctly remember my first shivaree. I was six years old and had come to live in Gothenburg in the fall of 1912. The local druggist had just been married. After dark a crowd of boys gathered down town for a march on the newly-weds' home. As we progressed the crowd grew. Arrived at the house, we began to yell and beat upon cans and otherwise make a noise until in a while the bride and groom appeared on the front porch. Then the groom told us what we had been waiting for, that he had instructed the local candy kitchen to treat us to ice cream. As I grew up, in the next ten years, I participated in many more shivarees. At least once but occasionally more than once, a popular newly-wed couple was shivareed by the local youngsters. I recall only boys participated; it was a little bit rowdy and too late at night for little girls.

Belling and Warmer are other words for the custom that were used in Nebraska in the 1870's. Mari Sandoz says that the latter is still current in the sandhill region. Calithumpian, a name often used elsewhere, has not been common in Nebraska. See "Charivaria," by Mamie J. Meredith, in *American Speech*, VIII (April), 1933, 22-24. For instances of bellling and warmer she cites the *Lincoln Daily State Journal*, January 1, 1878, and November 22, 1874.

The Nebraska shivaree is far from extinct. In 1936 the *Louisville Courier* of March 5 described a local shivaree

on the preceding Sunday evening, and the Plattsmouth *Journal* of May 25, 1936, described another of local occurrence.

A news item from Hastings printed in the *Morning Journal* of Lincoln of June 16, 1946, read as follows:

There'll be no more of the old-fashioned charivari parties on Second Street here. They're getting out of hand, in the opinion of Police Chief C. W. Cawiezel.

Here's what has been happening, Cawiezel said:

1. The bride sometimes is placed on one fender of an auto and the groom on the other, forcing them to hold hands across the hood to keep from being thrown off.

2. The bridal couple is hauled in a small trailer, which is zigzagged and whipped, forcing the couple to hold on tightly to keep from being thrown out.

3. The newly-married pair is forced to ride on the running board of an auto.

The chief assured citizens the police will not interfere with "reasonable" community celebrations of marriages.

The shivaree has often been played up in Western literature, for instance, in the play "Green Grow the Lilacs" by Lynn Riggs, given by the New York Theater Guild in 1931. This play was the predecessor or inspirer of the popular "Oklahoma."

The Infare

Another necessary accompaniment of frontier life was the *infare* (usually but less properly spelled *infair*) which took place on the day following the wedding. "It consisted of a visit of the bride and groom, the bride's folk and perhaps others of the wedding party to the home of the parents of the bridegroom." Sometimes the infare was a sort of housewarming or party of welcoming to their new home by the bride and groom and the bride's parents. Not infre-

quently the young girls attending rode horseback, riding behind their escorts, or on separate horses. Or the coming of the guests was by wagons.

In the frontier period an extended honeymoon was out of the question but sometimes "the couple loaded up a grist and drove gaily across the prairie to the mill, camping along the way while awaiting their turn. Or perhaps they took a two or three days trip to the County seat to buy a few articles for their scanty housekeeping."

Deaths and Funerals

A widespread custom at a death, as at Fullerton or Fairbury, was to toll a bell the number of years of the life of a dead person.

In early frontier days the corpse might be wrapped in a blanket or sheet. It was not unusual for caskets to be made from floors or cupboards if no lumber was to be had. In some instances coffins or rough boards were blacked with shoe polish, or lamp black or soot were applied to the coffin. When saw mills came coffins might be made to measurements. Such coffins were "somewhat triangular in shape, wide at the shoulders and narrowed to a peak at the feet." "In towns the casket for an older person was nicely covered with black alpaca, those for children with white cloth." If the death came too late in the day for burial, friends "sat up" with the body, keeping the face of the corpse wet with vinegar in order to delay mortification as long as possible. No actual "wake" was held. Neighbors came in and sat with the dead. "In our neighborhood" said an informant, "among the Protestants sitting up with the dead there was no drinking. Polish neighbors sat drinking at the home or drunk." If there was opportunity for formality or effort, all blackness possible was availed of for the burial. Usually little funeral equipment was to be had. There were services by the preacher at the grave as well as when the funeral was conducted at the home of the dead person.

While the family was at the burial many brought food to the home. In Nance and Thurston Counties, for example,

"a sort of elaborate dinner was given, with roast meat, fowls etc. provided. Everybody stepped in and partook and there was something of a reception afterward."

Throughout the century mourning was worn for months. Those not able to afford new mourning garments borrowed black garments in order to show respect for the dead. Horses in a funeral procession were always driven at a walk, no matter how great the distance to the cemetery. Letters from those in mourning must always be edged in black.

Whisker Vogue

Whisker vogue still characterizes the celebration of certain days. As a reminder of frontier times, men sometimes dispensed with barbers and let growths of whiskers, beards, "sideburns," handlebar mustaches, or goatees cover their faces. As late as August 18, 1935, for the Fiftieth Anniversary Picnic at Diller, Jefferson County, this practice was observed. For the same or similar occasions the daughters of pioneers went about the streets in garments of old style, poke bonnets, hoop skirts, lace mitts, such as their grandmothers wore. The Golden Spike Celebration at Omaha, April 26-29, 1939, honoring the anniversary of the completion of the Union Pacific Railroad, was made an elaborate occasion. It was marked by both masculine and feminine reminders of frontier days, whisker growth for the men and old fashioned apparel for the women. The shops too were made up to suggest pioneer times.

SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

Church Occasions

When a new preacher moved to town there was a Pound Party. Everyone took a pound of something to a welcome party in his home. Hunters shot wild animals to provide meat for the winter for the preacher, as a deer or a buffalo. Such parties were held in Dawes, Thurston, and Nance Counties and elsewhere. There were Donation Parties also, later, when the preacher seemed hard up.

Those who called brought an offering of food or other gifts.

Church activities included Junior or Christian Endeavor groups, choir practice (the night when young persons dated), prayer meetings, missionary societies, Ladies Aid societies. Some churches had "socials," some "sociables," as did rival churches at Fullerton. In season these might be ice cream or strawberry socials (sociables) held on lawns, with Chinese lanterns lighting them. The *Omaha Times* of June 17, 1858, tells of a Strawberry Festival given by the Methodist Episcopal Church.

In all, there were five types of Church dinners: ice cream festivals, strawberry festivals, oyster stews, mixed suppers, and box suppers. "Solicitors" always young girls and their "beaus", drove from house to house listing what each housewife would bring to the church.

Church "Bazaars" and "Raffles" were popular, though the latter were ultimately stopped, as were lotteries in general.

The *Omaha Times* of June 24, 1858 tells of a Ladies' Fair, at which fancy work, cakes and edibles were sold.

On Sunday a child whose birthday had occurred during the week advanced to the front of the church and dropped in a box there as many pennies as the number of years of his or her life.

Other Customs and Social Occasions

A popular event was the Box Social or Mystery Lunch or Supper Box Party. Boxes or packages were brought by the girls and bid for by the boys. Usually there was some secret means of identification, by the ribbons or other decorations, communicated to the escorts so that the right box would be chosen. At Columbus sometimes as high as fifteen dollars were bid. The money went to the church.

Taffy pulls were of frequent occurrence at homes, sometimes at school houses. The participants took turns at pulling boiled-down sorghum till it was thin enough to stretch out.

Surprise parties had vogue in some regions. Merry-makers went by wagon or horseback to some cabin or iso-

lated home in pioneer days. Hayrack riding was a popular institution and so was the bobsled party.

Quilting parties at which quilts were pieced were also popular. They were held at homes. "Log Cabin quilts" reportedly 80 years old are said to be still in existence in Nebraska. Watermelon Feeds also deserve mention.

Mari Sandoz tells of Feather Stripping. "A dinner plate was placed upside down in the lap of each person. My mother gave each one a little knife and paper sack to be held in the lap, or a 'poke' made out of an old newspaper. The child then reached in under the plate and took out one feather, (a handful of feathers had been placed under the plate), stripped it, and carefully dropped the quill on the floor and the strippings in a paper bag. Riddles and jokes were told during the feather stripping. When phonographs were had there was dancing to the music."

Miss Sandoz tells also of Bean Picking. A bushel sack was emptied at a table. The guests separated the good from the bad and refilled the sack. Merrymaking followed.

According to the *Dannebrog News* of October 8, 1936, the big social event of the early days was the housewarming when a new home was built. There were drinks, almost invariably punch, just after midnight, at which time numerous toasts were offered and songs sung and speeches made. This was for the men. The women were served coffee, chocolate, and cake. All the rest of the night until daylight, sometimes till sunrise, was devoted to dancing the rapid whirling muscle-exercising Danish round dances, with one or two quadrilles thrown in for American flavor. These sociables or dances were immensely popular.

In rural communities and small towns, the general store served as a meeting place or social center, and it still may.

Along the Missouri river, as at Nebraska City or Brownville, it was an exciting social occasion when steamboats, especially the first steamboat of the season, arrived. At Brownville the young people were known to desert even church services to rush down to the banks when boats came in.

Courtship customs were pretty standardized in early days in Nebraska. Young persons "kept company." Sunday was "beau day." "In the evening a boy called upon a girl quite formally. He was shown into the parlor and there he and the girl spent the time, while the rest of the family kept away. He never stayed late. If he took a girl to evening church or to a party they were not to sit out in the buggy or sleigh after reaching her home, not if her parents were obeyed. He must bring her to the door but not enter. Neither must he come during the week unless for a brief call at the door. Mothers did not want their girls 'talked about'."

"Long engagements were common, sometimes lasting for years. The engagement was never announced even to the parents until near the wedding day. The engagement ring was usually a carved gold band. It was not worn until a short time before the wedding and then served as wedding ring also. To be an 'old maid' was regrettable. To be a divorced woman was to be shamed, no matter what the provocation had been."

SPORTS AND GAMES

Outdoor Sports

In the Sandhill country the wolf hunt or coyote hunt has been described by Mari Sandoz. It was planned in advance. Sometimes a few friends took part. Sometimes it was a community affair.

Riding and hunting were popular over the prairies from the first. Horse races were arranged and aroused much interest. The natural prairie grass made an excellent track. Bets were made freely. Backers might place fifty or a hundred dollars on each side. Outsiders bet considerable sums as well as local men. When the horses were from different towns, citizens exhibited their "loyalty" by backing the home town. The races might be running or trotting races. Occasionally there were "Ladies contests," these on side saddles, with side saddles likely to be the prizes.

Ball was played in simple form from the first. By the early 70's baseball had appeared and prairie towns had

their competing teams. Milford played Seward a game lasting from 2:00 till 6:00, August 18, 1871. Baseball was a well organized competitive sport by the 1880's.

Pitching horseshoes (quoits) was common from early days.

Croquet came rather late.

The bicycle arrived in the 1880's, and the vogue of roller skating reached Nebraska in due course.

Traditional outdoor games played by young persons were: Hide and seek; Pom pom pullaway; Run sheep run; Dare base; Steal sticks; Old witch, London Bridge; Farmer in the Dell; Drop the handkerchief; Ring round Rosie; Pussy wants a corner; Crack the whip; Cross tag; Shinny; One-two-three o'cat; Tin tin. Over fallen snow, Fox and Geese or Dog and Deer were played.²

There were contests in broad, high, standing and running jumping and in wrestling and racing. Men's races on special occasions might include a three-legged race, sack race, fat men's race, potato race, peanut race, and wheelbarrow race.

Indoor Games

Popular indoor games were: Postoffice; Hide the Thimble; Charades; guessing games; Spin the Platter. Card games were euchre, poker, hearts, high five, five hundred, flinch, and there was some duplicate whist played at the turn of the century. Auction and contract bridge belong to the present century. Authors were played and checkers, more rarely chess. Parchesi and tiddledewinks, etc., were transient amusements.

Statuary (one person strikes a pose. Others guess who or what he is supposed to be) was played either indoors or outdoors. So was paying forfeits. ("Heavy, heavy hangs over your head. What shall the owner do to redeem it?" The judge, seated in the circle, asks "Fine or superfine?"

²These were played in the standard ways, with local variations. For the "rules" see such a book as *Active Games and Contests*, by Bernard S. Mason and Elmer D. Mitchell, New York, 1935.

The person holding the forfeited object answers "Fine" if it belongs to a man, "Superfine" if it belongs to a woman. The penalty or sentence is then pronounced by the judge.)

LITERARY AND DEBATING SOCIETIES AND SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

These had various names, Literary Society, Lyceum, Debating School, or Debating Society, and Athenaeum. Leading citizens, ministers, lawyers, and others participated in the debates, which offered good experience for youths. The *Brownville Advertiser* records that on February 8, 1857, the Territorial Legislature incorporated the Brownville Lyceum, Library, and Literary Association, intended to promote interest along these lines. The capital stock was \$50,000, to be sold at \$5.00 a share. The membership fee was \$1.00 a season. The *Advertiser* had a notice of a meeting of the Library Association in its issue of September 9, 1859, and of a meeting of the Lyceum, December 12, 1859. In 1864 the Society raised \$400 to improve the building in which the meetings were held. The *Nebraska City News* records a Library Association there December 4, 1858. The *News* of December 3, 1859, mentions the Webster Debating Society "composed of young gentlemen connected with Mr. Raymond's school." The *Falls City Broadaxe* tells of the Richardson County Lyceum in the issue of January 1, 1861. The Omaha Lyceum was organized in 1860. The Omaha *Nebraskian* announced, December 12, 1860, as a subject for debate December 22 at the Congregational Church, "Resolved that the Legislature of Nebraska has the right and it is its duty to prohibit slavery in the Territory." In 1876 in Harmon's Grove on the Nemaha river was debated, "Resolved that Water Baptism Is No Part of the Plan of Salvation." In general, questions concerning governmental and economic topics were debated, such as "Popular Election of Presidents," "Missouri Compromise," "British Colonial Policy." Other questions debated were "Resolved that the Nebraska Legislature should pass a law releasing persons from debts outside the Territory after a residence of 60 days in the country," "Resolved that the Legislature should pass a herd law re-

straining all kinds of stock from running at large," "Resolved that men and women should be equal before the law in respect to legal rights and liabilities."

Often lecturers were invited to meetings to present some special subject.

Some topics discussed at Brownville in the days when Brownville College had been planned were: "Manifest Destiny," "Philosophy Greek and Roman," "The Historian, Statesman, and the Divine." These and other topics were mentioned in the *Advertiser* of February 25, 1857. The place of meeting was the Methodist Church.

As a rule, meetings of literary societies were held in school houses. The programs were made up of debates, declamations, dialogues and music, and there was usually a paper telling "jokes" about those present.

Spelling Bees

These were popular among grown-ups in the 60's and 70's and they are still popular for children as an educational exercise. Words were given out by school teachers or other available persons. Marks for spellers were registered as points for each side. At the end of the evening tallies were counted for each side, where two or more groups competed. The person who lasted longest before missing "spelled down" the others. Friday afternoon was the usual time for spelling contests for schools. McGuffey's spelling book was relied upon and memorized by the zealous.

Bret Harte described a spelling contest in his "The Spelling Bee at Angels, Reported by Truthful James." It was organized by grown-ups who sat around the bar-room stove. "The Spelling Bee" was reported as a new game in Frisco. The schoolmaster said he knew the game and would give instructions. The words he called for were: separate, parallel, rhythm, incinerate, phthisis, gneiss. Bret Harte's Bee ended in a shooting affray.

A district spelling contest (these are no longer called "Bees") was held at Wilber, Nebraska, April 9, 1946. There were written and oral contests, each won by a girl.

Figure Downs were held at times on Fridays after school hours. Arithmetical problems were placed on the board and pupils strove to finish first.

General school exercises might be held Friday afternoon also, with recitations, dialogues, essays, songs, etc., featured.

A School Exhibition ended the school year. This was more elaborate than the "Last Day of School" program. It was often given at night and in a church or hall to accommodate the large crowd. A basket dinner served in the school house, a "surprise for the teacher," was a frequent event on the last day of a country school.

Singing

There was much more singing in Nebraska in the early days and through the 19th century than there is now, though instruments were few. The liking for music had to be met by singing. As time went on there might be a violin, accordian, banjo, guitar or organ for accompaniment, or alongside the singing. Pianos were almost unknown for some decades. The songs were of two groups, sacred music, religious songs, and "opry songs" as they were sometimes called. The religious songs often sung were "Amazing Grace," "On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand," "Beulah Land," "Bringing in the Sheaves," "Throw Out the Life Line," "Pull for the Shore," "Work for the Night is Coming," and other Gospel Hymns from the books used for church or Sunday school. There was more group than individual singing. Groups gathered Sunday afternoons, especially at homes where there was an organ. There were also singings at country school houses, and sometimes "teams" from whole counties or from various communities sang in rivalry.

Testifying regarding the early songs reaching the old sandhill region in the northwest section of Nebraska, an old buffalo and cattle country, Mari Sandoz states that Indian songs came first, of course, then those of the French fur traders, mostly French-Canadian dance songs. The Texas cattle trail group came next. Few of theirs could be

called "cowboy songs" (songs of the open range) today. The real trail songs were softly melancholy spirituals and ballads, sung with no accompaniment beside animal bawlings and howlings. Then settlers from the East came with their songs. They brought copy books full of pieces, many similar to those of the Texas trailers. A Scotch-Irish family from Kentucky sang "The Cowboy's Lament," at a literary, a dance or a shivaree. Later came "The Old Chisholm Trail," "Old Paint," "When the Work's All Done This Fall," "Little Joe the Wrangler," "The Little Old Sod Shanty," "The Lone Prairie," "Nebraska Land," and, alongside these, current popular songs such as "Puttin' on the Agony, Puttin' on the Style," "The Unfortunate Miss Bailey," and sentimental pieces.

The Frontier County Scrapbook, II, p. 96, in the State Historical Society Library, tells that at the Kester Schoolhouse, Arch Heater was accustomed to sing "The Steam Arm," "Shelling Green Peas," "Putting on the Agony" and other pieces. At Morrill Schoolhouse Andrew Johnson sang "When I Ride My Little Hump-Back Mule." He said "oomp" and "mool."

THE DANCE

Dance parties of various types in pioneer and later days were given various names, "barn dances," "hops," "stepping bees," and, for play-parties in certain regions such as the Sandhills, "bounce arounds." "Hoedowns," "shindigs" or "shindies" were rather rough and boisterous yet were occasions having some standing. "Hog wrassles," on the other hand, were characteristically cheap and rowdy. In Nebraska newspaper usage, nineteenth century dances might be alluded to as "terpsichorean performances" or "pigeon-wingings" or gatherings for "tripping the light fantastic" into the "wee small hours."

In many small towns and rural communities the "best families" never danced. One contributor told of being a guest at an infare party. She did not dance, but her Methodist minister told her that she was unfit to enter his church, and from that day she never did. In pioneer times

gambling, dancing, saloons and vice were always closely associated and hence were banned by the church.

The play-party games popular into the present century over the Western plains thrived in regions where dancing was thought improper and was tabooed by the church. Neither the participants nor others ever called them dances. They were a lively and zestful species of social diversion for young persons in country regions or isolated towns and villages. They were at their height so long as there was little other amusement. In patterns they showed little change from those of the traditional English and Scottish games from which they descended. As communities became less isolated, and dancing floors, management, and musicians were to be had, such games waned in popularity, disparaged by city dwellers as childish or rustic. From their accepted position as a popular feature of social custom, the recreation of grown-ups, they passed into the tradition of the schoolhouse and playground and now linger in the dramatic games of Nebraska children played in open spaces outdoors.

Primarily the dancing was to song only. Largely the Nebraska play-party games were circle or ring dances or long line reels, with some one who knew the songs and tunes serving as leader. Later, various musical instruments, the fiddle, guitar, banjo, harmonica, even the organ or piano were availed of. The tunes were those handed down. Such dances as the waltz, polka, schottisch and two-borrowed. When the older traditional songs, ballads or narrative songs among them, were utilized, they tended to shorten, disintegrate, or merge. As time went on, the texts and tunes became more and more Westernized and more and more use was made of indigenous American tunes. The conduct of play-party games was noisy, but lively and spirited rather than boisterous. Additions to the songs were introduced and local matter or allusions improvised.

Play-parties might be held in front rooms, or yards, in school houses or school yards, or in barns. They were characteristically open to all in the region round about.

They were especially enjoyed on moonlight nights outdoors. Participants might come from a dozen or more miles away. Cider or lemonade or coffee with doughnuts was served. Intoxicants were not favored. The main refreshments were cake, cookies, roasted apples, pies, etc. Men wore shirts of various colors, sometimes stiff collars and cuffs of celluloid. Women were in long dresses of calico or gingham with shawls. As quadrilles or square dances replaced the play-party for group dancing, and when dances were held in hotels or halls, there was more formality in dress and refreshment.

Among the inherited songs that were popular were "Needle's Eye," "Oats, Peas, Beans and Barley," "Farmer in the Dell," "The Miller Boy," "Green Gravel." American of origin were "Buffalo Gals," "Old Dan Tucker," "We'll All Go Down to Rowser's," etc. Nebraska's most popular play-party game seems to have been "Skip to My Lou," ("Maloo," "Malue," etc.)

Changed conditions and a more tolerant attitude on the part of the church gradually weakened the taboo on dancing which had given vitality to the play-party. The lessening of community isolation and the growing competition of other forms of amusement helped to break it down. Such dances as the waltz, polka, schottisch and two-step, and square dances (quadrilles, lancers) gained favor. The later play-party games were influenced by and finally replaced by them. Early in the present century the play-party was still fairly common in outlying places, but it is hard now to find it surviving. The present revival of folk-song and folkdance in general, especially of the square dance has brought with it the revival of many dances of the old circle and line type, and it may bring the renewal to some extent of the play-party. But, if so, it will be conducted in more sophisticated surroundings than in pioneer days with the accompaniment of music.

THEATRICALS AND OTHER ENTERTAINMENT

With the coming of "Opera houses," visiting troupes reached the larger towns. They played such dramas as

"Uncle's Tom's Cabin," "East Lynn," "Ten Nights in a Barroom" and "The Count of Monte Cristo." Amateur theatrical societies were often formed which sometimes attempted to play Shakespeare. At Nebraska City a Dramatic Society was organized as early as October, 1859. An item in the *Nebraska City News* of December 31, 1859, read, "The Dramatic Society gave its second representation. Mr. J. G. Abbott as Othello, and Mr. Story as Cassio sustained the characters excellently." The Dramatic Society of Brownville gave its first performance April 23, 1876. At Fullerton amateurs presented "Othello," "Macbeth," and "The Merchant of Venice."

Frank A. Harrison wrote an account of "Nebraska History Plays" in *Nebraska History and Records of Pioneer Days* (1918), in the State Historical Library. Mr. Harrison tells of his first experiment in Garfield County, a spectacle play in which Indian battles were acted out. Some weeks later he gave one at Bellevue, and a year later he gave a history play at North Platte.

The Omaha *Nebraskan*, June 2, 1860, mentions the Philharmonic Society as in its sixth year.

At times a director was imported to a town and a cantata or pageant of some type was locally presented by local children.

The coming of the professional circus with its morning parade and its afternoon and evening performances was always a great event. Also, somewhat later, the Street Fair and the Carnival.

Children got up imitative dramatic performances which they wrote, directed, and acted themselves. They gave circuses also. Admission to these affairs was usually by some fixed number of pins.

FOOD

Buffalo meat and venison were early forms of meat provided by hunters, and sometimes catfish were caught. Wild duck and turkey and geese were plentiful and so were prairie chickens and quail. Codfish and mackerel were brought in later. Jerked (dried) beef and salt pork became

staple. Canned oysters were a real delicacy. Other staple food consisted of potatoes, hominy, cornbread or johnny cake, flapjacks, pancakes, buckwheat cakes. Sorghum gravy was made by browning flour and lard together, adding water, and boiling. Dried apples and navy beans were relied on barley coffee and sorghum molasses. Occasionally a bee tree gave up a store of honey. Fruits were choke cherries, ground cherries, wild plums, wild grapes, mulberries, gooseberries and crab apples. Ice cream and the sundae were late delicacies. The sundae and its name made their appearance at about the end of the century.

Mrs. Kittie McGrew, writing of "Women of Territorial Nebraska" in the nineteenth volume of *The Nebraska State Historical Society Publications*, left a description of a pioneer log cabin built in 1855 which was superior in many ways to the majority in the locality. She said of the kitchen (pp. 97-98) :

The kitchen was a very attractive place, with a good stove and other conveniences not usually found in pioneer cabins. Its walls were hung with strings of red peppers, mangoes, popcorn and some choice seed corn tied with the husks and slipped on slender sticks. A great variety of gourds hung from wooden pegs driven into the walls. Some of the gourds were used for dipping water and some, with openings near the slender handles, held rice, dried corn, berries, or other household necessities and made fine receptacles. A sputtering two-lipped grease lamp, with cotton flannel wick, or perhaps candle wicking gave a fitful and feeble light In the yard was a well with a long wooden beam from which hung a chain and the old oaken bucket, a gourd dipper conveniently near, and a huge excavated log for a watering trough. Nearby was the great ash leach or hopper where the lye could be run off into the log trough to be made into a choice brand of soft soap. Near the kitchen door stood a split log bench where the family might have the tin basin for an early morning wash. There were great iron or copper kettles, suspended on poles or forked sticks, which were used in making soap and hominy and for heating water for the family washing and for butchering. All these were considered necessary adjuncts to a well regulated pioneer household.

ADDENDA

It is customary when a boy or girl shows up with a new pair of shoes for other boys or girls to spit on them.

Deserving of mention are the Pioneer Photograph Album and the Autograph Album. In the latter, sentiments or verses were written as well as signatures. The vogue of collecting autographs lasted through the century.

Water-witching, attempts to find water by a divining rod, have been reported at various times, for instance from Platte County and Jefferson County. Rather peculiar old men searched for water with a forked stick of willow or other wood. The stick was much like a "sling shot" or "nigger shooter." It was held by the two forks and the point was supposed to point downward at the sought for spot.