

Pioneer Lifestyles

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The life in the pioneer days was a lot different than it is today. This report includes facts about pioneer life, as well as personal information based on individual people's lives. Two pioneer women are Nellie Strohm and Rovene Allen.



Clothing was homemade such as jeans and tow-linen. Make-up was not worn at this time. Shoes and slippers with heels were not worn either. When the people would first buy their shoes, they would be very careful with them. They would walk barefoot until they were 100 yards away from their destination. Then they would put on their shoes so they would not wear out the bottom of the shoes. Men wore leggings that covered their legs. They wore homemade shoes or moccasins. Men would wear hats made of raccoon. Some of the men dressed in full suits of buckskin.

Most of the people relied on farming. The main crop was corn. The closest trading points from Marshall were Fort Harrison and Vincennes. The excess materials were shipped to New Orleans. This usually took a three-month journey. On the way home men traveled by foot, passing through three or four Indian tribes in the western part of the Mississippi, Tennessee, and Kentucky.

Bread was baked in Dutch ovens on boards or in the ashes. Tea, coffee, and sugar were rarely used except on the visit of the preacher. The food was plain but healthy. Salt was brought from Cincinnati to Vincennes, or floated down on the Ohio and up the Wabash. The wealthy men would buy excess salt and sell it for a profit.

Cattle and hogs were often turned loose in the spring and were not usually seen again until winter. During the day, sheep were kept in an enclosed area and at night in high corrals. This prevented them from being killed by wolves. The penalty of trying to steal cattle was a public whipping, not exceeding 100 lashes on the bare back, imprisonment not exceeding two years, and a fine not less than one-half the value of the animal.

The wildlife of the area consisted of deer, turkey, rabbits, squirrels, fox, otters, muskrats, possums, and a few bear. There were also panthers, catamounts, wolves, wildcats, weasels, minks, skunks, polecats, porcupines, owls, hawks, and a few herds of wild horses. Some of the fish were catfish, muskellunge, bass, perch, sturgeon, spoonbills, shad, and eels. The list of birds consisted of geese, ducks, brant, prairie chickens, grouse, and partridges.

The life of a pioneer was very monotonous. Pioneers had no general system of schools or religious teachings. The Sabbath was a day of rest for the young and old. People looked forward to barn raisings, log rollings, or quilted frolics. The men held shooting matches. The winner would get beef, turkeys, whiskey, and sometimes wagers of money.

Nellie Strohm



The eulogy to Nellie Strohm was very interesting. She was born December 15, 1880, as Nellie Ethel Davidson in a farm home near Marshall, Illinois. She was the daughter of John and Calista Davidson. On January 21, 1906, she married Charles Strohm. They had five children together. Nellie had 22 grandchildren, 21 great-grandchildren, and one great great grandchild. She also had 15 in-laws, 20 nieces and nephews, and countless neighbors and friends.

In many ways, she was typical of those pioneer women who helped make this country what it is today. Nellie's typical day consisted of cooking over a wood stove, pumping water, and carrying it into the house for cooking, bathing, and washing. She also made most of their clothes, scrubbed them clean on a washboard, using soap she had made in an old butchering kettle, dried the clothes in the sun, and ironed them with a heavy iron heated on the stove. Nellie would hang her milk in the well to cool, put straw under the carpet for more wear and more warmth, and filled the straw tick mattresses twice a year with clean straw. She gave birth to five children by lamplight in the drafty house and nursed them all on castor oil and prayer.

Nellie Strohm cooked for a large family. During the summer, she had to cook for the family and two hired men. Nellie made a garden, canned vegetables, and stored potatoes and turnips in the root cellar. She also chopped cabbage and chopped it until the juice ran to make sauerkraut.

Always skeptical of doctors, she took medicine only when she thought she needed it. The first time that she went to the hospital was when she was 85. She had an emergency appendectomy years earlier on the kitchen table. When Nellie had a fever of 106 for three days, the doctor said that she would not make it unless he cut off her leg. She told him "Now doctor, I know you can do something to save me and my leg." The doctor listened and performed an operation on the dining room table.

In 1913, she learned how to drive an overland auto, but she did not know how to put it in reverse. On her first trip to West Union, she had to drive around a four-mile square to get the car going in the right direction.

Nellie hated the fact that her sons sold their milk cows and got rid of the chickens, because it was easier to buy milk and eggs in town. She went to town and bought some chickens and drove out to her son's farm and turned them loose. Nellie thought that he needed those chickens whether he thought so or not.

She was a regular Indian. She had developed her senses to a high level. Nellie could smell a boy who had been smoking behind the barn before he got within 50 feet of her kitchen. She could also see to thread a needle when she was 80. As far as hearing goes, no son of hers ever tiptoed into the house late at night, shoes in his hand, without Mom calling out, "Is that you?" and calling him by his name.

When she was a child, Nellie and her family went to the Methodist, Christian, Brick, and Baptist churches. Nellie was Baptist, but believed that Christianity was the important way to live. She knew that everyone had the same God and should worship the same God. This is only a glimpse of the real Nellie Strohm. She was a hard-working and remarkable person. If we all made use of our talents like she did, the world would be a better place.

Rovene Allen

On washday, the wash boiler would be brought into the kitchen. Then Rovene would carry the water into the house in large buckets full. It probably would hold six buckets. Each bucket would hold eight or ten gallons. Then she would have to "break" the water when it was almost boiling. She would put about three tablespoons of Lewis lye in it, and the lye would bring iron rust to the top. It had to be skimmed off, and the wash water would be clear, soft, and clean. She would then put more than half of the water in the washtub and with a washboard and a bar of P&G soap, the wash would begin. For a family of four children, plus Poppy and Mommy, this was a big laundry.

Rovene would have to rub the clothes on the washboard, wring this soapy and dirty water out of the clothes, sheets, towels, blankets, and overalls by hand.

She would boil the dish "rags" and by adding more lye and soap, the grease and dirty water would come out. By five or six o'clock, she would maybe be finished with the washing. Then the water would have to be carried out in buckets full and poured on the flowers or in the pigpen. Some rinse water would be kept to mop the kitchen floor. Sometimes in the hot summer, Mommy would set the tub in the yard, and the kids could cool off by playing in and out of the tub of cool rinse water. Sometimes mom would use the sudsy lye water to clean and scrub the brooder house. This was not the only day that she would do this. It would be done two days a week.

Mom had to carry all of the water in and out of the house that was used for washing, cooking, or bathing. She had a washstand in the kitchen and a washpan. For a bath, mom had a large washtub, and she would get in this and wash by the cookstove in the kitchen, or in the front room by the heating stove. You never forgot and bent over with your bottom next to the stove!

The lamps had to be filled with coal oil and the chimney cleaned every day if she expected to piece quilts or get lessons. Then when the gasoline lamps became popular, they were so nice. Mom could see what she was doing.

On ironing day, Mommy would build the fire good in the coal stove and set the "sad irons" on the front of the stove. She had a rag folded many times to hold the handle. The ironing board was

just that. Poppy or grandpa had tapered the end of it just, like they are now. Next, they would lay it over the back of two chairs. Everything was starched on washday. They used about two tablespoons of flour mixed with cold water to make a smooth paste.

Later on, irons were made with a cover and handle to clip on the heavy part. Later, they were replaced with a gasoline iron. They needed air pumped into the bowl with the gas.

As you can see, life in the pioneer days is a lot different from today. Most of the clothing in the pioneer days was homemade. Nellie Strohm and Rovene Allen were only two of the many pioneer women that lived in this area. Their lives are an example of most women in the pioneer days. They would stay at home and do hard physical labor, while now most women have jobs outside of the home.