

WEST JEFFERSON IN DAYS GONE BY

By Charlie Miller

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LIFE IN PIONEER DAYS, if a pioneer was completely isolated from his fellow man, his position was certainly a hard one. In such cases, the cabin was generally made of light logs or poles and was laid up roughly, only to answer the temporary purpose before a solid structure could be built. Usually a number of men came into the country together and located within such distance of each other that enabled them to perform many friendly services. Scattered residents would come together to help erect the cabin. The site of the cabin was usually selected with reference to a good water supply, often by a never failing spring of pure water, or even by digging a well. First a number of trees were cut down, nearly of the same size. Logs were chopped from these and rolled to a common center. This took most of the day. Next preparing the foundation would take most of another day. It would take as much as four days to erect the cabin.

The logs were raised to their places with hand spikes and skid poles and men standing at the corners with axes notched them as fast as they were laid. Soon the cabin would be several logs high and the work would become more difficult. The gables were formed by beveling the logs and making them shorter and shorter. The gable logs were held in place by poles which extended across the cabin from end to end and which served also as rafters upon which to lay the clapboard roof. The clapboards were five or six feet in length and were split from oak or ash logs and made as smooth and flat as possible. They were laid side by side and other split stuff laid over the cracks so as to effectually keep out the rain.

The chimney was an important part of the structure and taxed the builders with their poor tools to the utmost. In rare cases it was made of stone, but most commonly of logs and sticks laid up in the manner similar to those which formed the cabin. In most cases it was built outside of the cabin, and at its base a huge opening was cut through the wall to answer as a fire place. The sticks were held in place by mortar, formed by kneading and working clay and straw. An opening was sawed or chopped on one side of the cabin for a doorway. The door its self was a clumsy piece of wood work. It was made of boards rived from an oak log and held together by heavy cross pieces. There was a wooden latch on the inside raised by a string which passed through a hole and hung upon the outside. The string was pulled in at night and the door latched. Many cabins had no door and the entrance was protected by a blanket or skin of some wild animal. The window was a small opening often devoid of anything resembling a sash and very seldom having glass. Greased paper was sometimes used in lieu of the latter.

The floor of the cabin was made of puncheons, pieces of timber split from trees about eighteen inches in diameter and hewed smooth with the broad ax. Many of the first cabins in this area had no floor at all. Some cabins had cellars which were simply small excavations in the ground for the storage of a few articles of food. Access to the cellar was gained by lifting a loose puncheon. Sometimes there was a loft, it was reached by a ladder, the sides of which were split pieces of saplings, put together like everything else in the house without nails.