Life on the Illinois Prairie in the Mid-1800's

by Katherine (Wright) Hart

Katherine Stow Wright is referred to in James M. Hart's book, as the wife of Charles Dwight Hart. Katherine and Charles were the parents of Frank Stone Hart. Katherine was my father's grandmother. She was born in Mass. on March 27, 1847.

The introduction refers to "Katie (5)." This would have been Katherine, and, therefore, her story starts in 1852.

The narrative gives a firsthand account of the hardships of the Illinois prairie pioneers and puts some flesh on old bones.

My father, Richard, typed this from handwritten notes that were made as part of an oral history given by Katherine in 1927, when she was 81. The handwritten notes are lost.

Contributed to the Hart/Hartt Network by Stephen Hart in Florida

Katherine (Wright) Hart

Father and Mother, with four children, namely: The eldest - Willie (11) - Mary (7), Katie (5), and Lyman (3), left Greenfield, Franklin County, Massachusetts, in the month of grey November, for Illinois.

Our first stop was at Utica, New York - Father having his only brother, Oliver Wright, living there.

The next I recall we were in Peru, a very cold night, about the supper hour, and Father was trying to find a way to transport us to Mendota. Finally an elderly farmer man took his lumber wagon, put in a plenty of straw and buffalo robes, and we sat in the bottom of the wagon, our heads covered up, riding over a frozen rough road.

The next stop we were in Sublette, and were in part of a house owned by a man whose name was Newcomer. I think they were formerly from New England. We had to cook upstairs, and the stove - a cheap four-hole affair - would not bake in the oven, so mother was obliged to prepare all meals on the top of the stove. I well remember the corn-meal mush fried, and most always pancakes for breakfast.

If my memory serves me right we remained there until spring, and the next move we went to Palestine, on Francis Ingals' farm - he, wanting to go to California to explore in the gold mines, wished to have a married man look after his farm, and also quite a good many sheep. The house was large enough to accommodate the two families.

Mrs. Ingals' children were of school age, and all of us, excepting brother Lyman, attended. The schoolhouse was built of logs in Palestine Grove, with long seats hewn from the trees. I do not know how far we had to walk, only know we carried our dinner pails with us.

The Ingals had a nice orchard which was quite unusual for these days, and a swing hung from the

large tree, which we enjoyed, and was about our only recreation. The Ingals' children, with us, used to go and gather a plenty of hazel nuts.

Now I do not know bow long we remained there, but do know the next move after Mr. Ingals returned. Father made a deal with Ephraim Ingals (he being a brother of Francis) and Lewis Clapp of Lee Center, who came to the west from the east in the early days when there were many broad prairies which a plough had never touched, he (Mr. Clapp) invested in a great deal of land, and when my father purchased the 160 Ephraim Ingals was in partnership with him, and that was my childhood home in Bradford township. The old house still stands in the back yard. Father employed a carpenter from Lee Center, and the house was built, we remaining with the Ingals while Father stayed in Bradford and boarded with Mr. Frank Starks, a brother of Aunt Emma Cates, until the house was partly completed, and then we left the Ingals' home and came to Bradford.

I do not know what Father paid an acre for the farm, but do know the rate of interest was ten percent, the general rate through the country. The result was we were not able to keep the farm many years - that is, the 160 - so father sold a part to the neighbors, and kept 80 acres, which was paid for, and I think Oscar Naas is now living on it. Of course a new house was built.

Well, at the time the Civil War broke out the price of corn went down one winter to ten cents a bushel, and many had their cribs full, as it was a wonderful year for corn. The price of coal, sugar, coffee, and many other necessities, was very high, so we, as many others, had to find substitutes on which to exist. For fuel to cook with we burned that beautiful corn. It made a very hot fire. We raised the sugar cane, and the leaves were stripped from the main stalk, and Uncle Cassius had an Uncle James Phillips who lived on and owned what was Captain Frost's place afterwards, he having purchased it from Mr. Phillips, and he had a machine that would grind the stalks, so we would gather and the juice was boiled in a large vat down to a heavy syrup at Mr. Phillips, most by evenings by the use of lanterns, and often a beautiful moonlight, in the month of October. We children looked forward to that time as quite an event, as the neighbors were very sociable, and very much in sympathy with each other during the hard times. Barley seed was roasted for coffee in the oven, and ground in our kitchen coffee mill, and we used the sorghum syrup with which to sweeten it, made from the juice of the sugar cane. We used candles which Mother made from the tallow of beef, and the crude fish oil for our lights until the kerosene was sold, and I do not know when that was. We had a plenty of milk, made our own butter, but often saved the butter to pay our store bills. One winter during the Civil War we moved our kitchen stove into our little sitting room, to save fuel. Mother was a good cook, and father provided what was necessary, and I have never known what it was to sit down to a table without substantials in the way of food.

Brother Will was old enough to enlist in the Civil War so he and many others joined the cavalry company. He had a nice horse and saddle, and the company was drilled several weeks before they left, so we used to go and see them have their sham battles, that were to get them in practice for a real battle. Well, this left Father without help for farm work, so he was obliged to hire.

Well, one great event which I left out during some of the years. Sister Atta was born, and she, the only one, was a western baby.

Well, to go back to the earlier days when we children could not assist with the work, father put a man and wife in the front part of the house, and they had a stove, and did their own cooking. You may be interested that it was Mr. Pat Kennedy and Mary, his wife, who were the father and mother of the Kennedy who owns the sheep yards in Rochelle, as well as other property.

Mother made cheese, and it was shipped to Chicago. Dr. Ephraim's family always had a cheese or two every year. Mother's fancy work was braiding palm leaf hats for men, something she learned when a girl living in New Hampshire, and sold them to the stores. That was the way she paid for a silk dress which was her wedding dress. Some of the farmers in Bradford had Mother braid them some as they were so comfortable for hot weather.

We raised our hops so we could make our own yeast cakes, and make our bread. I do not

remember as there were more than three orchards in the neighborhood when we first came to Bradford, and that was Zebediah Shaw, who married Betsy Starks, an older sister of Aunt Emma Cates, and they lived in a log house and the walls inside were papered with the printed weekly newspaper. The next orchard was owned by Mr. Hulburt. They also lived in a log house, that is now the home of Mr. William Degner, that married Kate Hart's sister Mary. The next orchard was owned by Mr. Evitts. You still see the old shell of the house on Bradford Street, which is adjoining Will Jones' farm.

The land being new on our farm we raised a plenty of delicious watermelons and pumpkins; also fine squashes, so that did help out some. We had very cold winters when we were on the broad prairie, and no trees for the first few years to protect us from the wind, but as the years went by we had a fine orchard, and always sent apples to Dr. Ingals. Our door-yard trees were of many locusts, and when they had become of good size it was the year that the destructive locust bug bored inside the trees and destroyed our shade.

Father made his own sled, and after the corn was picked, and that was generally very late in winter, he then went to Lee Center and chopped and hauled wood for summer use.

We seldom got our mail but once a week, and that was usually Saturday night. We of course had no Sunday School or Church to attend when we first came to Bradford, so when the horses were not too tired Father and Mother and we children would get into the lumber wagon, our only buggy, and drive around the prairies, and, oh, such beautiful wild flowers of many colors that we did gather. And I remember we would drive as near the pond as we could, and Father would gather the pond lilies, and also a r?? which was called sweet flag. Mother would dry it, and it had a flavor much like a nice extract, so occasionally we did go away from home, and we would chew a little piece to sweeten our breath, and also tie a little in the corner of our handkerchiefs. That was our cologne.

When Father first moved to our prairie home the pioneers called him the "White shirt Yankee with very black eyes." He had always been in the habit of wearing the plain white heavy muslin, made by Mother, and I think they were quite generally worn by the working class of people in the eastern states. They (the neighbors) wore what was called the hickory cloth, a very heavy material of striped blue, also made by the women in their household, and of course no sewing machine. So Father was called that name for some time, but as the years rolled by, and he began to exchange work with the farmers, this little black-eyed white shirted Yankee carried the pitchfork on his shoulder and stood at the end of the threshing machine, as Mr. Wright stacked the straw so good, and we would like to have him. I remember be would come home, and Mother would say, "Why, Father, didn't you stay to supper with the rest?" His reply was, "Oh, I had so much rather eat at home than anywhere else, with you and the children."

I had forgotten to mention how much we did enjoy the wild game, as the sky was full of geese, ducks, and also prairie chickens, and brother Will dearly loved to handle a gun, so it was not an unusual thing for him to go out and bring in a goose before he had his breakfast, and when that goose was prepared to eat we were very appreciative, as we did not cure much in those days, excepting pork. We generally had our own lard. Those were the days when Mother made a sweetened chicken pie, and were I able I surely would make one.

Well, we had a sad event occur. This Mr. Phillips whom I have mentioned, that sold his farm to Captain Frost (oh, by the way, he was an Uncle of Cassius Northrup's) was a ,an who liked to rove, and at the time when there was much excitement in the gold mines in Pike's Peak, he, with his brother Gerad and my brother Will - who also was much inclined to travel - decided to start in the spring, going in a covered wagon, and on their way, well into the west, they pitched their tent, and Gerad went down to the river to catch fish. He had only one arm (as he met with some accident when a boy) and it began to get quite late, so the two started out to search the lost one, and sad to say they never found Gerad. His pocketbook, lying on the bank of the river, and what it contained, had been taken. Away in the distance they espied an Indian on the other side of the river, with bow and arrow. It was nearly dark, and he was making his escape. The two men returned to their lonely tent, but greatly lowered in spirits, they decided to travel on; reached their

destination, and returned late in the summer. They each were in good health, but gained nothing in a financial way.

Much to our surprise they were not satisfied, and Mr. Phillips, with my brother and one other in the party, started in the early fall. I think it was two years after their first trip. The team on the covered wagon was a pair of mules. Well, they went on their journey, and arrived quite a distance from the mountains, and a heavy snowstorm set in. The party became separated, and they were obliged to stop. My brother Will wrote us an eight-page letter, telling us that he was waiting on table in a restaurant, to pay expenses for himself and also his mule, which he expected to ride to the mountains, when the storm subsided. In this letter he sent us a picture of himself, and that was the last we ever heard. Mr. Phillips returned without him. The storm was so bad, and they were so long separated, that Mr. Phillips could never find out anything of his whereabouts, and was thankful he was spared and able to return to his family. Just think of the great sorrow Father and Mother passed through in losing their eldest son.

The rest of us children continued to attend the District School on Bradford Street. The school building was then an unpainted cheap affair, and so cold. The stove did not draw well, and the stovepipe needed cleaning often, so the result was we were obliged to go to the nearest neighbors while the older boys-let the fire out and cleaned the pipe.

I left school the spring I was sixteen, and was greatly needed at home. One winter Mother boarded the teacher by the name of Addie Wright, and she gave Sister Mary and myself our first music lesson, she having been educated in the eastern schools. She had a brother who owned a hardware store in Mendota, and that was the reason she came West.

Well, now I am going to go back and tell a little more about the time we first struck the broad prairie, and some of the way the people had to do to farm their lands. All small grain was sown by hand, walking back and forth with a sack on the shoulders. The corn was planted with a hoe, from little bags which had strings attached to tie around the waist. The rows were made first with a team and man standing on what was called the marker, and when it was large enough to plow a small affair could only plow on one side of the row of corn, so it took a long time to complete a field. The small grain was harvested with what they called a cradle. The knife was just like a scythe, but it had a wooden frame made that would cut a swath just about large enough to bind by hand, and then, as you know, all grain was then stacked. The threshing lasted very late in the fall.

Those were the days when we could see the Pond from our house, and hear the prairie wolves howl as they were very numerous. The rattlesnakes were so plenty that as we neared the pond we had to be very cautious or we would walk on one.

The gum stalk was common on the prairie. It had a large yellow flower, and we children would go one day and break the stalk, and a white sticky substance would form on the opening. We would break a plenty of them, and then leave it harden, which took about two days. Then we had the fun of going around and picking off the hard chunks, and it was then very fine gum, better than you could get at stores.

There were 40 acres of ground opposite of us which belonged to Mr. Frank Starks, the sod having been turned over with the breaking plow, and on these new lands it would turn up what was called the red-root. They were very hard, and made splendid fuel, very much like hedge-wood, and Mr. Starks said he would gladly like to get rid of them, so brother Lyman and myself had a box without wheels, had a strong rope attached, and filled the wood box, which in those days always stood at the back of the stove. We were very glad to have them to burn, as we had not been in our home long enough to raise a crop of corn - thereby had no cobs. Well, we wore a hole in the bottom of the box before we stopped. You see, Stanley and Paul, we did not know of such a thing as a little express wagon.

One night I especially remember, the first spring on the farm, when the house was partly completed, the floors having been laid downstairs and upstairs, and we could go up on a ladder. We slept on the floor, and during the night there came up a terrific storm - a hard prairie wind, and so much electricity. The house shook. We arose from our

slumbers. Father went out with a lantern, expecting to see the house go over. Well, he took some of the lumber and propped up each side of the house. The rain fell in torrents until late into the night.

A very peculiar instance happened that night. As Father opened the kitchen on the north a bird flew in, all wet, and Mother always had a line back of the stove to dry dish towels. He wisely located himself, and when daylight came and it was time to get breakfast the same door was opened, and he went away. But the strange part of it; the same little wanderer would come and perch himself on the north porch, and when the evening work was done and the lamp taken away, he would go to the same place, and remain until we opened the door in the morning. This continued for nearly a week. But one night, as we children watched for him, he did not come back. I often wish I could remember what the name of the bird was. Its color was brown and grey.

I often think how far the neighbors were apart from each other, and when we visited, which was usually in the day time, we took the road with its high weeds, and thought nothing of walking two or three miles; took our sewing with us, and stayed to supper, which was the usual custom. The meal was generally substantial - good home-made bread and butter, sometimes hot biscuits, cake without frosting, and mostly dried fruit, with cooked sauce. No napkins, very little silver, oftentimes pewter teaspoons. There were many good cooks in the neighborhood, and very charitable when some one was sick. They depended a great deal upon the herbs that grew on the lands.

People did not have many chairs in the home, so as we began to have our little parties in the different families, the only way was to get some kegs which had contained nails, and some long boards from the barn, place them along the side of the room, get either bed quilts or blankets to cover them, and we were very comfortable. The refreshments often times were such as home-made doughnuts or cookies, passed around in the old-fashioned milk pan, usually followed with a large pan of apples, as people by this time had apples, and many varieties which were very delicious. For a change at other times we were allowed to go into the kitchen, which served also as a dining room, and pop corn, and make molasses candy. And, oh, how much fun we did have when it had gotten cold enough to pull.

I especially remember one party that was held at Shaw Station. It was a very cold night in winter, with plenty of snow on the ground, and it was customary for the boys to have a sled, and go to the houses and get the girls, and when we heard the sleigh bells coming you can rest assured we were ready that night. The boys furnished the oysters and crackers. The hostess prepared the rest. Well, about 11 o'clock it began to snow. A high wind followed, and we were there in a real blizzard. The clock struck twelve, one, two, three, four, and we did not feel safe to start until the peep of day, but as the folks had a very large fireplace that could burn great long pieces of wood we had it very cheerful. But when we left the place the snow had piled very high, and when we reached home it was nearly breakfast time.

We used to have a great deal of snow, and I can remember there were no over-shoes to buy. We usually wore the calfskin shoe, but one winter I went to school in a pair of red-top boots with copper toes, just like the boys wore, and as I was the only girl who had them some of the scholars made a great deal of fun of me, but I told them I wanted to have the same as brother Lyman had, and I felt very proud of them, and they cost more than did the shoes. In those days if the neighbors, as well as ourselves, had an extra pair for Sunday we thought ourselves very well fixed.

Well, the years rolled away, and at the age of sixteen sister Mary went to live with Dr. Ephraim Ingals' family in Chicago, they having three little girls too young to go to the city schools. She taught them their first lessons, and entertained them in general; was taken in as one of the family, as they always kept a maid for the other work. Mary enjoyed her position, and when the children were in bed, Mrs. Ingals would go often to the skating rink or the theatre, and take Mary with her.

She remained with them three years, and when she returned home I went in the month of April to Chicago, Mrs. Ingals having a half sister who lived on Michigan Avenue, and who wanted me to come and take charge of her two children - one boy five years old and his sister seven years. Now

this all came about because my Father had purchased the farm of Ephraim Ingals, which I mentioned at the beginning of my writing. The name of the family that I stayed with was S. D. Kimbark, a hardware merchant. I was taken in as one of the family; told stories to the children, and heard them recite their little lessons; walked out to the lake-shore, which was very near; accompanied them to dancing school (the instructor a very handsome small and black-eyed Frenchman) in the evening. I often went with them to the theatre, and twice attended the Opera. They had a beautiful barouche to convey us, and always John, the coachman, who sat up on a very high seat in front, took great pride in driving a handsome pair of bay horses. Well, I only remained in the family until July, they going to the Lakes every summer. I greatly enjoyed my stay there, and it was really a fine education for sister Mary and myself having the change.

I remained at home until I married, and do not feel it is necessary to write more, since you children have heard and also experienced the life on the farm, and also the grandchildren must often hear it repeated. I still have a very strong attachment for the old black barn, and the newly painted white house, with its green shutters, and I love to ride over the old roads as well as I enjoy the new.

From Mother and Grandmother Hart — written in her eighty-first year, 1927, Ashton, Illinois.