

“Christmas was Rude to County’s Settlers”

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Franklin County was organized in 1855 in a time of deep division and bitterness in Kansas over the slavery issue. Violence was on the increase between free-state and pro-slavery factions. Fear of the future was rampant, and with good reason, as the year of 1856 brought the Pottawatomie Massacre and scores of murders and burnings.

At the time of that first Christmas in Franklin County, “Peace on Earth, Good Will Toward Men” had an empty, hard, almost sarcastic ring. It was a grim Christmas and an even bloodier New Year.

Besides the political turmoil, the pioneers of the new county were also faced with the sometimes cruel economic realities of the wild, new land. Rains could flood out newly planted fields in the spring, only to disappear for months through the hot, parched summer. Blizzards could hit without warning, freezing livestock and leaving lone cabins cut off from the rest of the world for days.

It was just such a blizzard that struck a few days before Christmas in 1855, numbing what little holiday joy had been mustered.

The storm swept over the county so suddenly that some people were stranded away from their homes. One young couple, who lived near what is now Le Loup, managed to get back to their 25-foot square log cabin on Christmas Day. They found snow a foot deep on the floor, on the beds and in the fireplace: silent testimony to the force of the wind and the looseness of their shingles.

A circuit-riding Methodist preacher, years later, recalled the bleak Christmas of 1855 in southern Franklin and Miami counties. The Rev. Cyrus Rice was snowbound several days with a discouraged and home-sick family that was already making plans to give up and go back East.

Their cabin logs were chinked near the top with twisted hay, which began to fall out, letting the fierce north wind and snow come in. Bed was the warmest place to stay.

Rice later recalled that under the covers, “I drew myself into as small a knot as possible and wished I had never heard of Kansas Territory.”

The next day, Rice tried to escape thinking about the cold by singing “Home, Sweet Home.”

“But my hostess cried the more and ordered me to cease singing,” he recalled, “and we all sobbed in chorus, said our prayers, and went to bed. It was Christmas Eve, but we had no merry gathering, no Christmas tree, no plum pudding....”

When he was able to leave, Rice pushed through the drifts and the treacherous snow-covered ravines to other cabins and communities along the Pottawatomie and Big Sugar Creeks. But he found no signs of holiday activity, nor could he feel any Christmas or New Year’s spirit in the cold air.

“I never heard ‘Merry Christmas’ or ‘Happy New Year’ once,” he later recalled.

In the months that followed, many settlers in Kansas did give up and went “home to the wife’s people.” However, those pioneers who stuck it out and repeatedly battled setbacks were a hardy, amazing breed.