

XXIX. FARM PRODUCTS-COON AND DEER HUNTING-SUGAR CAMPS.

It was hard "scratching," you may be sure, the first few years, to get enough wholesome food to live on after the pioneers settled near Maxinkuckee lake. Corn, at first, was the staple product, as its growth was rapid and it could be used from the time it was in the milk stage until it ripened about the time when "the frost was on the 'punkin' an' the fodder's in the shock." As soon as the ears began to "blister" they began to be plucked for use by roasting before the fire, by cutting the corn from the cob and

and boiling, and cooking in various other ways. When the beans to mature, a favorite dish was a pot of boiled corn and beans with a piece of fat pork to give the proper flavor. Potatoes and turnips, rutabagas, pumpkins and squashes, peas and onions, beans, cucumbers, lettuce, radishes, and all kinds of garden vegetables among which were all varieties of melons were planted and grew in abundance, and of the very best quality. The woods, too, were full of a great variety of wild fruits, such as huckleberries, blackberries, raspberries, gooseberries, cranberries, wild cherries, paw paws, black and red haws, crab apples and plums, and other fruits in their season.

And there was also an abundance of all kinds of wild game used for food, such as deer, turkeys, quails, ducks, prairie chickens, wild geese, pheasants, squirrels, and fish by the barrel whenever the big seine was drawn in the lake, so that, although it was quite different from what it is in these days of fancy dishes, the menu was sufficiently palatable and nutritious for all practical purposes.

Buckwheat was a favorite crop, as it matured rapidly and required less labor to produce it than other grains. Hot buckwheat cakes for breakfast, with a plentiful supply of wild honey or maple molasses made a meal fit for a king.

Almost every farm had a sufficient number of maple trees to open a sugar camp. Sugar troughs were made out of small poplar trees chopped out with an ax and adz and placed near the tree which was to be "tapped." "Spiles," as they were called, were made out of the branches of elder bushes. They were made about one foot in length, split in half, lengthwise, after which the pith was removed, thus forming a channel for the water to run into the trough. Holes were bored into the trees, into which the spile was inserted. The trough was placed under the end of the spile through which the water, as it ran from the tree, was carried and emptied. A sugar' camp was established at a convenient place on the grounds, a furnace was made of "niggerheads" arranged so that large kettles could be set in and heated from below. Sometimes a pole held in the forks or crotches of stakes at each end would be used to hold up the kettles so that fire could be kept burning underneath. Large wooden barrels or tanks were kept standing near by, into which the sugar water would be emptied as it was drawn in on sleds or carried by hand in wooden buckets as fast as the troughs were filled. Usually it was made the duty of the women and girls of the family to boil the water down to the molasses or sugar point, while the "old man" and the boys chopped and hauled the wood for fuel, and looked after the taking care of the water. There was a good deal of work about these primitive sugar camps, and it required a good deal of experience to ascertain just where the molasses point ended and the graining, or sugar point began. Frequently when the "stirring off" time came the young people of the neighborhood for miles around would congregate at a favorite camp, have a molasses pulling and make a night of it and the "boys would go home with the girls in the morning." These were Joyful times for the young people of those primitive days. Sugar making time was always in the spring of the year when the flowers were just budding into bloom and making the air fragrant with their sweetness; when the woodlands were clothed in their habiliments of living green; when the bird songsters sang joyously in the rich foliage, and all nature

joined in the glad anthem. Really the people were very happy then. They were the children of nature and knew nothing of the annoyances and perplexities of the break-neck world in which we are now living.

Canned fruits were not known in those days. Peaches and apples, after they began to be raised, were cut into pieces, and strung on a thread to dry. All kinds of wild cherries were spread out on a cloth and dried in the sun. When sufficiently cured they were put in a sack and hung up on a peg handy for use when wanted. Pumpkins and squashes were cut into thin rings, peeled and hung up on a pole to dry.

When deer were killed, the saddles, or the hams, were partially dried, or "jerked," as it was called, as in this way it could be kept longer for use and was more palatable than when salted and preserved in brine. The hides were neatly dressed and trimmed, and tacked up to the gable end of the house to dry.

The common American deer was the only variety found here when this county was first settled by the whites. This graceful animal was the most useful of all the wild game found here at that time. Its flesh was a very palatable and easily digestible article of food, its skin was made into various articles of clothing, and especially for moccasins, both for the Indian and the white man. Its horns were useful for handles for different kinds of cutlery, and its sinews for bow strings and other uses. During the day they usually retired to thickets and swamps, coming out to feed and drink by night, although they were frequently seen in daylight. In the winter they lived on buds of the wild rose, brambles, and various berries and leaves, and in spring and summer on the tenderest leaves and grasses. Some- times when the males would meet tremendous battles would ensue, resulting often in the death of one or both of the combatants. In January their horns would drop off, after which they would live peaceably, as if conscious of their weak and defenseless condition. The young were generally born in May or June. They were carefully concealed, and were visited, by their mother by day only occasionally, as at morning, noon and night. These fawns were easily domesticated, but they were troublesome pests, and were seldom kept any great length of time. The mother was much attached to her young and the imitation of their cry was often practiced by the Indians to bring the mother within reach of their weapons. The young, until about the age of four months, were bright reddish brown, with irregular white spots; after that age the spots disappeared and they resembled the old ones. Preferring to roam at night in search of food, they frequented the banks of lakes and water courses and salt licks, where they were easily destroyed. In walking, the deer carried his head low, the largest animal usually leading the herd, which went in single file. When alarmed it gave two or three high and exceedingly graceful springs, and if he saw any danger, he rushed off with the speed of a race horse, running low with the head in line with the body. They took to water readily, and could swim with their bodies deeply submerged, and so rapidly that nothing but an Indian canoe could easily overtake them. There were expert hunters and fishermen in those days, those who knew where the runways of the deer were, who knew all about their peculiarities and habits, and those who were familiar with the best fishing holes in the

lake and river, and what sort of fishing tackle was the best to use to capture the various kinds of fish that were the most numerous at that time.

The guns used then in hunting deer and other wild animals were rifles loaded with a single ball, instead of the double barreled shot gun now in almost universal use, so that the hunter, if he missed his aim, or failed to hit his game the first time, before he could load and fire again the fleet footed skipper would be a mile or so away in the woods and underbrush. If the shot happened to strike the deer and wound him, not so severely, however, as to prevent him from running, sometimes a long chase would ensue before he was finally tired out and exhausted by the "hounds" that were sent after him. If it happened to be a big buck with horns like an elk, after his fright was over he would occasionally turn and fight his pursuers. The barking of the dogs would frequently hold him at bay until the hunter could overtake him and fire another shot which would almost always bring him to his knees and finally result in his capture.

The animal was usually skinned, and only the hide and saddles and tallow carried home, unless it was a small animal and there was more than one hunter, in that case the legs of the deer would be tied together, a pole passed between them, and it would be carried home on the men's shoulders.

There were pretty good marksmen among the old pioneer hunters, those who could pick a squirrel out of the tops of the highest trees, and had no trouble in hitting wild turkeys and other wild fowl, that couldn't hit a deer one time in a dozen. The sight of a deer within shooting distance would invariably give him what was called the "buck ager," that is, his nerves would become unstrung and he would shake and tremble like an aspen leaf, making it impossible for him to hold his gun steady enough to get a focus on the animal, and so, if he fired and happened to hit him it was by accident. Those who were afflicted with this annoying disease seldom overcame it. It was a chronic ailment from which there seemed to be no relief.

Deer were very plenty in the region of Maxinkuckee lake. They went in families, or droves, and had regular runways from their feeding grounds to the lake and river where they went to drink. Near these watering places salt would sometimes be scattered, and these cunning animals soon cultivated a taste for this saline substance, and could be frequently found at these "licks" if the hunter could secrete himself so as not to be seen.

It was not an unusual sight to see eight or ten deer running through the prairies or woods, and the writer, when a small boy, remembers of having seen a drove of twenty, running tandem through an open stretch of ground about one-half mile from his father's house. They were running in a leisurely lope, with their short white tails erect. It was an exciting and beautiful sight, one that will never be forgotten.

Many hunting stories are still remembered, some of which, although strictly true in every way, will be hard to be believed by the present generation.

Sidney Williams, who settled in the territory now known as Walnut Township, in the vicinity of Argos, was an expert rifleman, and if he had half a chance he was sure to bring down his game every time, and in many of his hunting tours he frequently brought in from one to half a dozen deer. On one occasion he saw a large buck feeding on an island in a

marsh not far away. He told the hunter who was with him that he would have that animal, and perhaps three or four others that were grazing in the bushes near by. The buck on the island was a sentinel to give warning to those in the bushes of approaching danger, for, it should be known that these animals have a system of signals to enable them to flee from danger as have other noncombatants. Williams prepared himself for his trip across the marsh by cutting a willow bush and sticking the stem under his coat collar and letting the branches hang over his head while he crept on his hands and knees about forty rods until he got within shooting distance. The deer looked in astonishment at the moving bush, but before he could make out what it was, Williams had leveled his gun, taken aim, pulled the trigger and the deer fell dead, the ball having passed through its heart. Two other fat sleek fellows came out of the bushes to see what the matter was. One of them was killed, but the gun failing to "go off" the other escaped by running away as fast as his legs could carry him.

At another time he started after a gang of nine deer early in the morning. At first he commenced firing light charges. He followed them up, increasing the charges until they became used to it and did not appear to be disturbed by the sound of the gun. He succeeded in shooting the leader, after which the balance of the gang became confused so that they did not know what to do or where to go. Williams continued to drop one every shot until at four o'clock in the afternoon he had the entire gang of nine deer scattered around so near together that in less than two hours he had secured a wagon and a man to help him, and had them loaded and ready to start for home!

At another time, another hunter of the neighborhood, with a pack of dogs started up five deer which were chased to the bluff on Maxinkuckee lake. It was in the winter season of the year and the lake was frozen over with a coating of smooth ice. The deer went down the bank, struck the ice and fell perfectly helpless. An ax was secured and all five of the deer were knocked in the head and killed.

If the reader has any doubt about the truthfulness of this story, a blank affidavit will be secured, properly filled out and affirmed to, and filed as an evidence of good faith in the archives of the Ananias club.

There were fur traders all through this region at that time, who visited the various settlements periodically and paid good prices for all kinds of hides.

Raccoons were plenty all through the woods, and coon hunting by the light of the moon was a favorite amusement for the boys" and even the old men occasionally enjoyed the exciting sport. A good coon dog was a necessity. Without a dog that could scent the track of a coon, run him down, tree him and hold him there, and bark so you could follow him up and find "where he was at," it would be next to impossible to catch any of these night prowlers.

Sometimes two or three coons would be run up the same tree. They usually went as near the top as possible and hid in the forks. If the moon shone bright enough they could sometimes be brought down by a rifle shot, but this did not often happen. If some of the boys could climb the tree and had courage enough to do so, his coonship might be punched off of his perch with a stick, and if he fell to the ground he was sure to be caught, If

the dog understood his business. Usually, however, to secure the game the tree had to be chopped down. The dog watched which way it was falling and by the time it ,,,.as down he was at the top, among the limbs, ready to catch his victim if he had not been killed or crippled in the fall of the tree. Then a fight for life would ensue, for these raccoons were warriors from away back. If the dog could hold them until the hunters could get to his assistance the tragedy was ended and the defenseless animal was knocked in the head with an ax and killed. If there was more than one, the others would generally get away and climb the nearest tree, when, if they were captured, the same operation would be gone through with.

Sometimes in the race after coons, the dogs would scare up a polecat, and, pressed too close, he would open his perfume sack and the sickening stench he would emit was enough to knock a strong. man down. There is probably no smell on earth so deathly nauseating as that of this spunky little animal, if you happen to be in close proximity to him when he decides to give you an illustration of the manner in which he defends himself. He is provided with a small sack in which the fluid is deposited. When closejy pressed the fluid is emitted and "switched" into the face of the enemy from the end of his long bushy tail. It is an efficient weapon, for the odor is so exceedingly strong that even animals turn and run to get away from it. They are of the weazel family, and live mostly on fowl ls of various kinds. In the early days the woods were full of them, but of late years they have become almost extinct, for which-thanks! .

There was another little animal, quite numerous about that time, that also had a peculiar but very effective way of defending himself-the porcupine. He was furnished with quills upon his body covered with sharp prickles, some of which were as much as twelve inches long, and capable of being erected at pleasure. When attacked he rolled his body into a round form, in which position the prickles were presented in every direction to the enemy. The ends of the quills were as hard and sharp as the points of steel darning needles, and no animal could touch him without being severely punished. He would remain rolled up in a round form until the danger had passed, when he would undo himself and go about his business.

At that time there were also panthers and catamounts lurking about through the woods, and an occasional black bear was seen between 1835-40, but these animals being dangerous to the inhabitants were soon killed and driven out by the white hunters and Indians who were still in that region.