

The First Martin County Farmer

Martin County is well known for its farms and hard working farmers from the early settlers to the farmers of today. But, what was it like in the very early days of Martin County for farmers? George Murray was one of the very earliest farmers in the county, and his experiences might make us wonder why he stayed, as well as providing us with knowledge of the many hardships faced by those rugged, early day pioneers.

George Murray came to Minnesota from Nova Scotia at the age of twenty-one. Murray, and his brother, eventually settled in Martin County in June of 1863. At the age of twenty-two, George Murray, with his brother, homesteaded government land in Rolling Green Township. George Murray was the first permanent settler in Rolling Green Township. Initially, he and his brother cut hay and stacked it on the north shore of Pierce Lake. They then went back to Preston in Fillmore County where his brother had lived, finished the fall's work, and started again for Martin County with twenty head of cattle for the winter.

When they returned to Martin County, they built a stable for the cattle out of poles and coarse hay. They then built a dugout in a hillside covered with poles, hay, and earth on top for them to live in during the winter. They had no stove, but dug a fireplace in the bank at the end of their dugout. The fireplace was about two feet square and extended about three feet above the roof of their dugout. It seemed to work quite effectively for them. The establishment of this home took place fifteen years before there was a railroad in the county, and ten years before the newspaper printed its first issue.

A few days after Christmas Day of 1863, it began snowing and continued until the day before New Years. Then the wind started and they had a three day blizzard. New Year's Day of 1864 was the coldest day ever recorded in St. Paul to that point in time.

Two young men on their way to Jackson with a yoke of oxen and a wagon stopped a day before the storm. They asked if they could stay until the storm moved through the area. They put their oxen in the stable, covered the door, and brought firewood into their shanty. They then had supper consisting of pancakes and pork, as the Murrays had brought a good supply of flour and pork with them.

By the next morning, the storm had completely shut them in their shanty with no way of getting out, and their supply of firewood was quickly running out. Eventually, one of the men made his way through the chimney to the outdoors and was able to chop down a tree close to their dugout. He in turn dropped the split firewood down through the chimney.

After being snowed in for three days, they were finally able to escape the primitive hut and get to the stable. However, what they found was ten head of stock dead and one missing. The hungry cattle had eaten their way through the hay barn and were later found buried in the snow. Fortunately, both ox teams were still alive, and the men on their way to Jackson were soon able to continue their journey.

Murray's brother, Duncan, became disenchanted with their situation on Pierce Lake and left. He settled in Lac Qui Parle County, and later died during a massive snowstorm there in January of 1872.

George Murray stayed in his dugout and cared for the remaining cattle until spring. During the winter and spring he caught many mink, muskrats and fox for their fur.

He continued trapping during the winters at Fox Lake until 1865. Then, after filing on his land and taking out citizenship papers, the first in the county to do so, he enlisted in the Army and went south. He was stationed in Chattanooga, Tennessee, until being mustered out in September of 1865. He then returned home to his claim on Pierce Lake. During the time he resided there, he increased his land holdings to 330 acres.

Murray was married to Sarah Jones on February 28, 1867. They raised four children. Later, Mr. & Mrs. Murray moved to Fairmont and built a home on Budd Street. However, Mrs. Murray died soon after moving to Fairmont. Then in 1900, Murray returned to Nova Scotia and married a childhood friend, Nellie Sutherland. They returned to Fairmont to live.

After several years, Murray and his wife moved out to the old farm and remained there until 1911. They then again returned to their home in Fairmont. They had one child.

George Murray, known as one of Martin County's best loved citizens, passed away at age 99 in 1940. A testament to Murray's character includes the following: he was a charter member of Phil Kearney Post, G.A.R.; member of the First Methodist Episcopal Church; a lifelong prohibitionist; walks twelve blocks daily; and interestingly enough, he never fell for the "automobile craze."

Probably the earliest pioneer farmer in Martin County, George Murray was a prime example of the early settlers in Martin County and the many hardships they endured. His life was certainly not easy, yet he never complained and was always positive in his endeavors. His efforts provided the direction for others that followed in our county and built it into what it has become today. There are certainly many difficulties in today's modern world; however, it sometimes may seem helpful to keep them in perspective in comparison to the hardships endured by our very earliest settlers.

For more information about George Murray, or other early Martin County settlers, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.