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PIONEER VIRTUES



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In considering the importance of the frontier experience in American history, Frederick Jackson Turner importantly observed that “Behind institutions, behind constitutional forms and modifications, lie the vital forces that call these organs into life and shape them to meet changing conditions.”

Heather Wood Ion asks us to consider anew the virtues of the pioneers and their continuing importance in making our communities not only more free and more humane but also more resilient in times of hardship.

My grandmother harnessed herself to the plow, since she could not afford an ox or a team of horses. Her elder two sons walked behind, steadying the plow, and the younger children walked hand in hand ahead of her so that she could keep a straight furrow. Neighbors came to her aid, and she was able to plant a field and a garden. At first glance she appeared ill-equipped to be a pioneer. The only child of Chicago spiritualists, she had studied at the Art Institute of Chicago about 1897 and wanted to pursue a career in book design and publishing. She married an architect and bore two sons before he was killed, then married the accountant of a construction firm and had another son and my mother. Shortly after the birth of my mother, my grandmother and her husband agreed that they were happier not living together in a small Minnesota town. As a means of support he offered her two claims to land in Alberta. By the time she returned from Canada to live out her years in the warmer United States, she had farmed as an independent woman for more than twenty-five years; she had founded the first literary society in support of farm women; she had created a gift shop for the goods produced by local artists in the small

town twenty-two miles from the farm; she had formed a cooperative for rural health care and education; and she had worked as a midwife, a teacher, a nurse, and business manager. She had her first one-woman show as an artist at the age of seventy-four.

Neither my grandmother nor her peers across the Western states and provinces would recognize the “American Values” being presented in this election campaign year. Campaigners stridently tell us that above all we value self-reliance, free markets, life (meaning no abortion), marriage, family, and resistance to liberal education; or that we value regulations to enforce fairness, social justice, the efficiencies of welfare to those in need, and equal opportunity. These statements of values are presented as either/or belief systems and as the true reflections of the Constitution. My grandmother would probably grumpily ask, “And what’s all that to do with the price of fish?”

Perhaps by reflecting on the practical virtues of our pioneer ancestors we can transcend the divisive abstractions of our contemporary political rhetoric. Could we learn something valuable to our own lives by examining the

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lives of the pioneers with realism rather than romance? What were their expectations as they worked to overcome their own limited knowledge in order to build their lives and their communities? Were they really rugged individualists who were all at once restless, rebellious, wasteful, materialistic, optimistic, and naïve, as some historians claim (Billington 1974)?

In attempting to answer these questions, our first challenge is to clear away the myth and anecdote through which we think we know these people. Great myths about frontier settlement abound: the West was populated by solitary, rugged frontiersmen in a culture of lawlessness and violence; families journeyed alone across the prairies and settled into stark, lonely lives of isolation; the miners, trappers, and other explorers were uncivilized folk whose only thought was pursuit of riches; women were helpmeets and civilizers but otherwise had little impact in the West. Such myths are largely unsustainable when we rigorously examine the annals, artifacts, and archives of these settlers' lives.

Fictional literature has shaped some of our inaccurate views. Willa Cather profoundly observed, "A pioneer should have imagination, should be able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves" (Cather 2004, 27); nevertheless, Cather's novels often portray strong and standoffish women and feckless men who little resemble their historical counterparts. Similarly Laura Ingalls Wilder's books, rewritten prior to publication by her daughter in protest against the New Deal, do not report as much as they construct a fictional world that diminishes our understanding of what it took to survive on the prairies. (In *Little House on the Prairie*, not only does Laura's father decide on the homestead site for his wife and daughters without determining access to water, but when he decides to move them on to another frontier supposedly in protest against government interference, he leaves behind the plow rather than abandon his handmade rocking chair gift to his wife.) Another popular source of pioneer myth was

the Western novels of Louis L'Amour, who created a fictional world of cowboy and gunslinger romances never intended to be taken as historical reporting. Such books have entertained us with tales and thus shaped our perceptions of the frontier, but the values and virtues represented in the stories are not necessarily those by which the first settlers lived and came to thrive.

Serious scholarship about the pioneer experience began mostly as the frontier experience was drawing to an end. Frederick Jackson Turner took seriously the impact of the pioneer experience on America's political and social institutions, but in declaring the frontier closed he foreclosed the possibility that the lessons of pioneer settlement could inform the course of a new century. Some historians further distanced the pioneers from the present by exaggerating the violence and disorder of the Western settlements. During the last generation scholars (e.g., Reid 1980, 1987; Riley 1988) and novelists (e.g., the novels of Elmer Kelton) began to grapple more completely with the pioneer story in all its complexity, triumph and tragedy.

New lines of scholarly inquiry—including global migration studies, the work of Vincent and Elinor Ostrom taking seriously the history of polycentrism and developing new ways to study how communities establish effective governing mechanisms, and the scholarship of Deirdre McCloskey and others to reframe the role of cultural virtues in the story of socio-economic progress—offer us ways to reconsider our relationship to the pioneer experience.

The migration of peoples across North America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was astounding in scope and intention. The lands of the American West were purchased by the U.S. government primarily in three large transactions: the Louisiana Purchase (1803), Texas/California purchase (1845), and Alaska purchase (1867). Government policy therefore played a central role in encouraging

and subsidizing settlement of these lands. The railroad companies were given large land grants in return for building the railways, and they immediately advertised for settlers. By 1900 the U.S. government had distributed one billion acres of land, including 147 million as homesteads and 183 million acres to the railroads (Frail and Gambino 2012).

Beyond government incentives, however, settlement hinged upon the thousands of people willing to venture their lives, their families, and their futures in pursuit of their myriad dreams. In the Gold Rush year of 1849 alone, 25,000 people reached California by land, another 30,000 by sea (Crutchfield 2005). The facts of this rapid migration, the true stories, are more poignant, more inspiring, and far more complex than the fictions and the historian's interpretive concepts; they also frequently invite us to reflect on issues of civic virtue and values. By values I mean the abstract principles or social goals held to be exemplars of ethical behavior; by virtues I mean the "right action" or the habits which are proven effective for living and are thus deemed to be meritorious and worthy of being passed on to the next generation. In listening to current political discussions, we are told mostly about what we *should* value and how these values might be expressed through government policy. What most of us hunger for, however, is more talk about the virtues—both personal and social—that can serve us all well in times of economic challenge and cultural division.

Our search, then, is for the most valuable legacy the pioneers left us: to understand the real virtues they developed, practiced, and shared in the challenging environment of the frontier. The anthropologist seeking to understand how migrant populations survive and thrive must ask very practical questions. How do ideas apply in both the old and new worlds? What makes one kind of behavior more useful than another? What new skills do immigrants need to learn in order to survive and help their children flourish? How could

they meet their needs and aspirations with the resources and struggles of a new environment?

The first striking characteristic of the Westward migration was a law-mindedness and the determination of the settlers to maintain the cultural norms, especially the literacy, of their roots. Most of the migrants west, including the early trappers and miners, traveled in groups of kin or role and work cohorts. Before leaving the familiar environment, these groups agreed on a constitution of behavior regarding labor, resources, decisions, and disruptions (Reid 1997). When infractions were deemed to be criminal, not only did the pioneers establish a lawful procedure, they often waited until an independent group could supply members of a jury—which sometimes involved waiting for the next wagon train. At other times the group waited a season for appropriate weather for travel (McLaren, Foster, and Orloff 1991).

The first lending library in the trans-Appalachian West was established in 1803 in Ohio. Miners and trappers venturing farther into the wilderness carried Plato, Dante, and Shakespeare with them, and they asked newcomers as a first and vitally important question what books they had brought with them (Billington 1974). Many a young man seeking his fortune in a mining camp recorded with astonishment the philosophic and literary discussions conducted around the campfire. Herders and cowboys were particularly eager for new reading material, and they ran ongoing contests of recitations of poetry and plays along the trail.

The story of Reg and Edith Baker, leading pioneers in the foothills of the Rockies, exemplifies these concerns. As a young farm laborer in the north of England, Reg was asked to accompany a member of the gentry who sought his fortune in Canada. Before they departed, they visited the estate where Edith, then thirteen, worked as a domestic servant. Three years later a letter came to Edith from Reg, asking if she would come out to be his wife. With great excitement, the

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other servants and families on the estate began to pack Edith's trunk. Then a letter came from Reg with her ticket, and the request that she bring as many books as she could about veterinary medicine, gardening in cold climates, and how to build basic machines, such as pumps. The lace doilies and beautiful damask tablecloth were removed from the trunk as the books filled it up.

At last the sixteen-year-old set off, first to Liverpool, then across the Atlantic to Halifax, from there by train to Calgary, and finally she was picked up at the train station by Reg. They were married right then in the town, the heavy trunk of books loaded into the wagon, and they went west over rolling hills for almost fourteen hours. At their destination, Reg indicated their little sod hut and said she would find the makings for a meal; he then went off to tend to his stock and unload the wagon. The neighbors arrived quickly the next morning by horse and on foot, and Edith said, "They politely shook my hand and at once turned and eagerly bent to see what books I had brought." For all the hard years, Reg and Edith sought ways to learn what they needed to know to become competent in their community. They were driven by need, but also by a strong faith that they could learn, and then teach, whatever was required of them.

As the eastern towns filled and news of available land circulated, emigrants chose to move across the Mississippi for many different reasons. Some sought to escape what they perceived as increasingly crowded conditions in the East. Others hoped to find lands free from the endemic diseases of the river valleys. Malaria, cholera, and smallpox decimated populations in the Missouri and Mississippi valleys (Billington 1995), and it has been estimated that more than 20,000 people died on the overland trails of these diseases and from scurvy, dysentery, and "ague," which may have been a tick-borne fever (Meldahl 2007). Whether seeking freedom from these diseases or from lack of opportunity, emigrants were also seeking freedom for social mobility and improvement.

Observers have remarked this mobility as a form of American restlessness and have frequently described it as a value, in the sense of a goal, but I suggest that it is a different sort of expression of the urge for settlement and self-improvement which seems to have characterized emigrants, pioneers, and their heirs. Whether the emigrant came from Ohio or Ireland, Germany or Georgia, each acted on a belief that a new beginning meant new opportunities and new definitions of social order. Cultural continuity was often challenged by the fact of cultural and aspirational pluralism, and this created a rich environment in which practical solutions for survival could be tested and refined. Deirdre McCloskey speaks of the "bourgeois virtues," including the dignity of labor, the freedom to innovate, and the use or application of knowledge (McCloskey 2010), as a framework of belief and action that dramatically improved the social, economic, and political lot of people in the trans-Atlantic commercial world. Likewise, we can discover similar virtues among the pioneers, foremost of which was their hard work and willingness to experiment with invention and ingenuity in search of practical solutions to challenges. Pioneers attempting to homestead on the prairie could not stop working: if there was dignity to their labor, there was also dignity in their endurance and in their faith and fortitude that their struggles would result in the improvement of their lot and the lot of their community. We must remember that less than half of those who filed homestead claims stayed and succeeded in turning those claims into property. Necessity was always present, and always potentially a crisis.

The pioneers were also realists who knew that a sudden storm could wipe out a crop, that a fire could destroy everything, and that no one was immune to these risks. In contrast to the current common belief regarding disasters, that "it can't happen to me," our ancestors seemed to feel at their core, "There but for the grace of God, go I." This acknowledgement of shared risk also affected

the ways in which pioneers helped each other, knowing that they themselves could be the next family in need.

Most striking in the diaries¹ of these emigrants is their long view: it seems from our perspective almost fatalism, but there is no evidence of expectations of immediate or even reasonable return on their labor (Broadfoot 1976). In fact, the expectations of reward seemed to be that “The best reward for a job well done is the opportunity to do more.” Today we are familiar with debates over entitlements, not merely for or against welfare claims but also extending to benefits for the middle class and tax breaks for the wealthy. Many an advertising campaign is waged with the words “You deserve it,” but these concepts of immediate or deserved reward were foreign concepts to the pioneers. Reward was survival with enough seed grain for next season.

A sense of stewardship was more prevalent among the pioneers than a sense of entitlement. Some of the farmers who exemplified stewardship of the land and commitment to community not only felt that wealth was only what you could share with others but also that riches based on land were in trust for other generations, not riches to be used, spent, or distributed. Some historians have viewed the pioneer period as profoundly wasteful, and they have written that wastefulness was in fact valued (Billington 1995). Closer examination reveals that the pioneers lived with a thrift and frugality that is now hard to imagine, so perhaps it is fairer to see this ‘wastefulness’ of natural resources as a consequence of limited knowledge rather than a valued behavior. The soil, the buffalo, and the trees were at least for the early pioneers astonishingly abundant, and it would have been very hard to imagine the desertification which has taken place. The abundance

of these resources was misleading, for not only were they not the endless endowment they appeared to be, but turning them into stable and renewable resources in small holdings was an overwhelming task.

The hardships of the trail and of “proving” a homestead claim (the contractual agreement by which the work of the homesteader to improve the land turned the claim into a deed property) might leave a family destitute, but most emigrants did not start out that way. The capital necessary to finance migration and homesteading served to select not primarily the rugged individuals of myth, but instead those who had already been prosperous or who had a significant support network of family willing to lend or invest in the move (Limerick 1987). The trek alone for an individual required a large cash investment. During the Gold Rush, for instance, one guide cost \$200 per person (between \$5,000-\$6,000 today) for the four- to five-month-long journey (Mel-dahl 2007). In addition, animals, equipment such as the plow, fencing, seed and, above all, additional labor were needed. One clearly shared trait of the pioneers was the fear of and rejection of debt. Indebtedness was avoided by long years of self-denial and disciplined saving. Both men and women sought ways to be paid for work, in addition to the mutual aid given freely to neighbors and strangers in need. A man might leave his wife and family on the homestead to work on the railroad for some months, or a woman might be paid for sewing, and the accumulated cash would help pay for the digging of a well, or roofing. My grandmother made simple handicrafts at night to sell during each rare visit to town, for she knew that “people were starved for frivolity.”

Practicality came in many forms and had to be applied in many different contexts. Previous experience acquired in the East, or in Eu-

¹ Although there are now various collections of diaries available online, I am referring mainly to the collections at the Huntington Library in Pasadena (see Reid’s bibliography), to the Glenbow Foundation in Calgary, Alberta, and to citations by Broadfoot 1978. I was asked to interview 268 pioneers in Alberta in the mid-1960s, and those interviews, plus the archives of Annie L. Gaetz and Michael Dawe at the Red Deer and District Archives, are a rich source of information. As an example of how rich this material is, Lloyd Lohr of Stettler, Alberta, continued a diary begun by his grandfather in Ohio, thus establishing three generations of daily comments on pioneer struggles and reflections.

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rope, could both help and hinder. Agricultural skills and ways of life are often transferrable to new environments, but expectations of the relevance of those skills in the new ecosystem might mislead the emigrant. Families who had farmed in the rich soils of the Ohio Valley were unprepared for the treeless landscapes of prairie and plains. Some who had been farmers had to learn how to become ranchers, and all had to learn to live with constant hardship and challenge. Adaptation and willingness to experiment were necessary to survival and came to be regarded as significant human virtues. Migration was recognized as disruptive, and as commanding new learning and new attitudes (Bhugra 2004).

Some emigrants said explicitly that they made the move in search of greater liberty or of freedoms for social mobility and were willing to endure the hardships because of that hope. Many of the settlers knew that social attitudes were more relaxed: there was loose territorial law on divorce, a strong anti-slavery attitude, and less discrimination against distinct ethnic groups (Reid 1997). The Jewish Colonization Association encouraged its members by promising freedom from prejudice. Many individuals were able to define themselves without a veneer of prior reputation or social influence, again a valued aspect of social mobility. Reg Baker said, as a very old man, “I was just a laborer boy on a farm in England, and only a war could have changed that, but here I could and did become a person I could never have imagined, because here I had to deal every day with the new world. As I learned how to do what was needed, I became a different person.”

Nevertheless, the standards of the pioneers largely remained the standards of “home” for at least two generations: for precedents regarding the social order and maintaining the harmony necessary to a subsisting community, most pioneers looked to tradition. It is important here to remember that the “standards of home” were largely biblical. The moral compass for most of the Westward

moving pioneers was overtly based on the Ten Commandments and a sense of responsibility to the Providence they felt at work in their lives. Even as stubborn an agnostic as my grandmother expressed herself about profound issues in biblical terms, and she could thunder in righteousness best when quoting the Old Testament. There was little public declaration of religiosity, but a profound faith, and humility in the living of life, as Reg Baker said, “Under the clear, high watchfulness of Heaven.”

The myths suggest that women on the frontier were mostly hookers, missionary wives, or widows; again the reality is far more complex and exciting to discover. Single women actually comprised 18 percent of all homesteaders in Colorado and Wyoming, and both they and women with husbands and families played a decisive role in creating a rich social life wherever they were. In Iowa, a women’s suffrage bill was submitted by 1866, and by 1880 there were 80,000 women employed as wage earners. Women established clubs and associations as fast as they could to constitute societies in which they could flourish. Many of these groups were dedicated to self-improvement, but after the Civil War a large number were formed to assist veterans and to advocate on behalf of displaced peoples. One woman was said to have started forty different organizations during her lifetime (Riley 1988). Nor were these clubs and associations merely groups of women gathering only to complete domestic tasks such as quilting or knitting. Many were rigorous educational institutions with conceptual ties to the larger world. (Picture a group of pioneer women gathering in a larger than usual sod house to debate the best ways to establish world peace after the end of the Napoleonic wars!) Some clubs focused mainly on expanding the skill base for living, thus seeking instruction on everything from methods of irrigation to methods of preventive medical care. Women’s associations sought access to decision-making as well as new skills, and many of these associations became national in nature rather than remaining local.

Whereas some historians tout the individualism and self-reliance of the pioneer West and others describe it as communitarian and collectivist, the reality again was more complex: self-reliance and a generous collaboration and reciprocity of mutual aid were equally necessary to survival. Although the settlers recognized their separate possessions as property, the conditions of their lives created a willingness to share tools ranging from a good shovel to a heavy plow. Sharing and borrowing both involved a profoundly serious responsibility for care, as well as for reciprocity. Shared work reinforced the lack of hierarchy both in travel and in the pioneer communities, and there was always strong criticism for anyone who was seen to be “putting on airs.” One of the most interesting of the Canadian pioneers I talked to in my youth had been sent to sea as a young child on the great clipper ships, but had never told his homestead neighbors that he had seen places like China and South America for fear they would think he was bragging. He and his peers would not comprehend the contemporary wish for celebrity.

Most of the journals and letters I have read speak far more of shared needs, resources, and responsibilities than of solitary or individual needs (Broadfoot 1976). There are many stories of solitary homesteaders (usually bachelors) who had to be rescued during a storm or hard winter. Few stories survive of people who rejected a call for aid or work on behalf of the public good. It was unthinkable to neglect those in need, even if their own efforts had reduced their circumstances, for everyone was aware that they might be the next to need assistance.

Another contributing aspect to the commonality of experience was that wealth was not obvious: everyone shared the same weather, land ownership meant more vulnerability to loss in many cases, and there were few ways to exhibit wealth even if it did exist. Some pioneers met the adversity and indifference of nature with a sense of combat, others with a

sense of awe, and some few disintegrated in the face of the challenges. The ideal of pastoral tranquility was little-known once emigrants encountered the vastness of the wilderness and prairie. In contrast to the myth of the heroic conqueror, the real reports of the homesteaders speak with humility and gratitude for survival in the face of what they encountered. Although shelves of books describe the Western settlement as “conquest,” the settlers themselves spoke of endurance, of perseverance, and of faith. The conditions of pioneering invited a shared exertion, and with that came a shared aspiration. As long as the pioneers engaged in farming, they did not speak of control of the external environment so much as engagement in learning how to live in that environment.

It is often said that the Western settlers were materialistic people. Many lists of American “values” (in the sense of goals) highlight materialism and often relate it to this idea of control over both purpose and circumstance (Williams 1951). Yet it is hard to see an acquisitive materialism as an attitude shared by our pioneers: they were not consumers of goods produced by others so much as they were creators. Although many pined for the abandoned piano or the culture left behind, they did not in those early decades invest their efforts in anything other than establishing something that would endure (be it a field, a quilt, or a literary society). Without question, pioneer lives were consumed by the material environment, but they recognized that fact as necessity and still debated the philosophic questions of meaning and faith, and sought every avenue for education for their children and continuous improvement for themselves. Because their survival depended upon mutual aid, many pioneers saw this giving of assistance to others as both the measure of their own worth and as the symbol of what made the pioneer life so different from societies in which status and privacy were more obviously valued. Most communities saw in themselves what Tocqueville came to see as the virtues of democ-

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racy in America, and they emphasized in their lives both an astonishing strength of personal character and a pervasive sense of interdependence.

The moral and civic lives of our pioneers would be familiar to Nobel Laureate Eleanor Ostrom (Wilson 2011), whose work advanced our understanding of common-pool resource decision-making. Pioneer groups lived by and grew in terms of their shared decision-making regarding their resources. Tools, labor, and the resources from the land were often subject to cooperative decisions about their use, decisions that had to do with available skills and immediate need and with the common purpose of survival. Participation was easily enforced in the small community in which the glue of gossip was as forceful as the visibility of effort. However, settlers knew that all would be affected by these decisions, and so most gave their attention and voices to the discussions and compromises that had to be made. If Farmer X was laid up with a broken leg and his field left to go to weeds, those weeds would spread to other fields and increase the work for everyone while diminishing the value of the crop. If Farmer Y's cattle kept breaking through a crude fence to eat their fill in the neighbors' oats and hay, then neighbors would show up to mend the fence, quickly and efficiently and with no tolerance for any excuse by Farmer Y. Often the site of these discussions was the schoolhouse, and there was a mutual responsibility for ensuring that formal schooling was available. If the crops failed so that no one had a cash surplus to pay the schoolteacher, the teacher would board in turn (a month at a time) with local families so that the burden was shared. We have perhaps forgotten how profoundly valued a teacher was in our early communities.

These habits of community participation continued for generations. During the summer of 1965, when our well went dry in Alberta, neighboring farmers used the party-line telephone to organize daily deliveries of water for

the next month. Decisions about shared resources did not require any convoluted process or formal political institutions. Farm communities used the party-line telephone for discussions of needed interventions: Who would do what when, how would they do it, and how would they pass on the next task to the next volunteer? These discussions reinforced the sense of mutual aid and mutual responsibility, and they strengthened the community members' faith that together they could deal with whatever they faced.

Sometimes the challenges were grim, and these circumstances required a different kind of process. Shortages of water required rationing; prairie fires required donations of any available possessions to help the victims; disease required quarantine, strictly enforced. We can see the pioneer communities as enduring together as if in a lifeboat. The moral imperative was that the community and the people who comprised it, and those who compromised to create it, would endure, persevere, and eventually survive the challenge. Thus stock died of thirst before people did; no one kept two if someone else had lost their only coat; and men would guard their community against decimation by "the smallpox train" or other such threats (Reid 1997). Authority was not in anything other than the shared experience: there was no pioneer bureaucracy, and land agents were dependent on the common good just as were the homesteaders. In our current culture of stakeholders and adversaries, it may be hard to imagine that governing institutions, communities, and individual enterprise were woven together in the pioneer experience in a cohesive and purposive way to enable the building of this new society. If media fictions have portrayed the frontier hero as a warrior, seeking both conquest and justice against the wilderness and fierce adversaries, the reality was in the determined struggle of both men and women to form a new civil society whose members originated in disparate cultures, held diverse skills and ambitions, and both separately and together faced incessant challenges.

It is worth reiterating that one of the startling discontinuities with the lives of our pioneers and our current time is in the expectations regarding effort. The contemporary world seems to express expectations in terms of return on investment (preferably immediate), as though returns can always be calculated and there is some formula for risk management. Although the pioneers were optimistic, they did not articulate such expectations, and they did express doubts about their ability to predict the future. They worked in hope, rather than in our current drive for reward and recognition. Success was evidence of luck and arbitrariness as much as of hard work, and most pioneers took no personal credit for having worked through a challenge. When I thanked Reg and Edith Baker for being such examples of perseverance and transformation, they said, “We were just the same as all the others on the land.”

The myths of the frontier pervade the legacy of the pioneer experience, but the real virtues our pioneer ancestors practiced constitute an inheritance we must not disregard. Like migrants the world over, the pioneers moved forward in hope of betterment and took responsibility for learning what was necessary. Self-improvement meant that all forms of education were sought and valued as supremely important; no one could know what kind of skills or knowledge would become of use. Their hard work was transformative and purposeful: they wanted to create the world of possibility, and they did not give up because

of immediate dangers or frustrations. Interdependence on the frontier reinforced their practices of morality and the broad hospitality and tolerance for newcomers. (If respect for “diversity” must now be enforced by policy, it is because the pioneer experience and lessons were lost somewhere along the way.) Mutual aid and associations to achieve specific purposes reinforced their sense of a shared destiny and purpose.

Without the support of formal institutions or judicial infrastructure, the pioneers conducted themselves according to a sense of civil obligation and law. The individualism of the pioneers was also an obligation: to contribute to the best of one’s abilities, and to cultivate those abilities. Practicality and adaptability were practiced and taught, but self-improvement certainly included aspirations to creative expression, and most communities tried to share music and books long before they had most modern physical comforts. Transparent integrity was perceived as necessary under the conditions of interdependence: hypocrisy was dangerous; each had to be able to trust the other to do as they said they would do. A person’s moral position was not an advertising slogan but was known through action; it was evidence of trustworthiness in a context where lives depended on trust. The community stood in witness to that trust. The faith and fortitude of the pioneers not only helped them overcome threatening crises but also helped them keep the long view, the desire to build an

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imagined world which would survive and thrive beyond their own struggles.

For the Western pioneers, justice was a concrete action to be taken in specific circumstances, not an abstraction; happiness was a pursuit, not a right; and democratic decisions were a practical more than a political responsibility.

Do we honor this legacy by practicing these virtues ourselves? Can we see the political campaign rhetoric in a different way as we reflect on our pioneer heritage? Our politicians constantly refer to the Founding Fathers, but few refer to the pioneers. Can we reclaim this significant aspect of our heritage by redis-

covering the stories of the hard lives lived for our benefit? Would our lives be more compassionate and more fulfilled if we tried? Perhaps we have lost the humor and perspective on challenge exhibited by some settlers:

“A prairie fire wiped out a homesteader’s possessions, and all but one singed rooster was lost. The neighbors were astounded when the homesteader caught the rooster and cooked it for supper. Why? They asked.

“Might as well start fresh,” said the pioneer.”

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