

A Winter's Tale

If the tale is true, the immigrant Menning family had some significant bucks when they left the Netherlands for America. Most pioneers didn't, of course. But some did. What it didn't get them, however, was plush accommodations on the steamer they took across the ocean, a trip which was, for them, no piece of cake. In the North Sea already, their ship collided with another. Both sunk, sadly enough. Down into the cold went healthy chunk of the Menning's worldly possessions.

They were saved, blessedly, when some freighter picked them up and brought them to Grigsby, England, the port from which they left for America, arriving eventually some time later in Quebec. Their next stop was Wisconsin—some relatives; but their purposeful destination, right from the moment of embarking, was Iowa, northwest corner just then being settled. In the 1870s, there was cheap, good land, productive land out here and it was still available. The Mennings took a place two miles east and one mile north of Orange City, all of their neighbors comfortably Dutch.

Their first abode, like everyone else's, was literally dug out of that same rich ground. The histories don't say what Vrouw Menning thought of mud roofs, but the literature of the era offers little nostalgia when it comes to a sod house. Even though they'd lost a great deal in the North Sea, it didn't take long for the Mennings to get a frame house up off the ground. But the new place was no palace, just 14 by 14. Welcome to America.

Soon enough they had good friends—the Schuts—from just down the road. One winter's day the neighbors dropped by for some friendly fellowship. Two big families, kids and all—just imagine! --packed joyfully into 14 by 14. Right neighborly, it was. Right neighborly it had to be. But there's more.

Neither family had weather.com on their iPads, so when a blizzard blew up out of nowhere that late afternoon, they were, so to speak, left out in the cold. There was no going home—that kind of blizzard.

Now the Mennings' old lean-to was big enough only for their team of horses and two precious milk cows. The Schuts had taken their wagon over, so they had team as well and were more than a little wary of letting those good horses outside in the storm. Alas, there was no room in the lean-to.

They had no choice but to make do, so Mr. Menning took control by putting the Schut's horses into their lean-to. Then he grabbed more than a few armfuls of straw and littered the house floor before leading their two precious milk cows into what was the only other shelter available, that new 14x14 frame house. The story goes that before those beefy bovines got in, Vrouw Menning made sure whatever foodstuffs happened to be around were stowed on the other side of what amounted to their Great Room, which was, remember, not at all akin to a dance floor.

So there they were—two wooden-shoe families, kids and all, and two milk cows, all warm and snuggly in a crackerbox that was, that winter's night, the only port in the storm. Once Mrs. Menning milked those two sweet beasts and pulled out an ounce or two of chocolate, the whole gathering had a great time during a long evening together in a blessedly warm house, drinking chocolate milk and singing their favorite hymns, psalms probably, in a picture, a portrait, I'd say, that is an image right off the canvas of any one of the great Dutch masters.

What history doesn't say is whether the milk cows knew Dutch or the psalms, so whether or not they sung with, no one will ever know.

What is clear—what is for sure—is that those early immigrant folks, dirt poor, somehow found a way to make do. You got to love it.

And remember, the Mennings were the rich ones.