

**August, 1974: Mildred Atkinson King read autobiographies written by J. C. Atkinson and his wife Polly Peckham Atkinson which are transcribed here:**

### **J.C. Atkinson Autobiography:**

*Mildred: Well I have this history that Grandpa Atkinson wrote and it doesn't tell when he wrote it.*

*Kathy: That's your grandpa right.*

*Mildred: That's my grandpa. Let's see...*

*Gaylord: J. C. Atkinson.*

*Mildred: Yes, J. C. His name was John and there were so many Johns that he took "C" and when I asked him what the "C" was he said "Candy." He always had a little sugar or peppermint drops in his pocket. I never knew him when he didn't. This tells when he was born in England. There were eight of them and he was born in England in 1834 and there were eight in the family and there were six of them living when he wrote this but nobody knows when he wrote it. Then he goes on telling of all the hard times in moving from here to there.*

*Gaylord: They left England when he was nine, or something like that?*

*Mildred: Let's see, I think he was born in 1834. They came to America in the spring of 1843.*

*"I was then in my ninth year. We came to Springfield, Ohio. From that time I have worked incessantly until my health failed.*

*My parents bought 80 acres northwest of Springfield in what was then called "Beachwood" which was comparatively new, mostly small clearings and heavy timber. Beautiful and productive country. Lived there for years. Did lots of hard work, cleared and loved our place and made it beautiful. But still not satisfied. Moved to Wisconsin in 1847 with a team, overland. Arrived in Beloit on 7 August, 1847.*

*Didn't like the country much. Had the ague a great deal. Finally bought 160 acres and subsequently entered more from the government, up to 300 acres. Here they (parents) made a beautiful home with a cheery hearth and a log fire and happy group on which we look back with a sigh. Here, at a ripe age, they died and are buried in Broadhead, Wisconsin.*

Father was a man of strong will, conscientious and independent. His word was law in the family and we didn't talk back. He stood up straight, 5 feet (*Mildred: I can't tell how many inches.*) and carried all his teeth to his grave. Died in 1887, age 84 years.

Mother was a tallish, blonde with a luxurious growth of auburn hair which was not gray when she died in 1884. Had severe stomach trouble ever after coming to America. She was a model of industry, a slave to her family and a noble, kind and tenderhearted dear mother. My education was limited. Being poor we were kept at home to work much of the three or four months of winter district school and I remember one winter that I never went a day. Hauled logs every day with two yoke of lazy oxen that were too poor to work, no overcoat, no overshoes at that day. Didn't even have an undershirt or drawers. Oh, but we did it enjoy a warm supper and the big log fire until we had to climb the ladder in the loft where the snow sifted through the warped, oak shingles often an inch or more

Went to school in the summer. All my schooling was in Ohio in a log school house...

*(Mildred: And then there's a part that's gone here.)*

... And was finished in Wisconsin in one of the same kind (schools) of slabs for seats and a 16 inch board along the side (which) was common in those days. Even these advantages were limited to three or four winters so it is safe to say that I have learned hundred times more out of school than in. I was an eager reader of ancient history. Combs and Fowler's works on theology. Combs "Constitution of Man," this I prized very highly. These I read by candlelight and often into the wee small hours. Since I was a grown up, I have read a smattering of almost everything except novels. I was always a great lover of poetry and spoke at spelling school such pieces as Graves Elegy, The Battle of Waterloo... Death of the Final Conqueror... And (somebody's) Ode to the Sun and many others. First began to read Burns 40 years ago. I like his verses for their common sense.

*(Mildred: And he had an original copy of burns with the leather – bound and everything and it went to Uncle Charles. And I don't know whether Betty got it or Pat, but they inherited it.)*

At the age of 19, I taught school in our home district and boarded around as was customary at that time. I was always handy with tools. Could do any common work in wagon, blacksmith, or carpenter shop. And I worked assiduously on shop, building houses, wagons and barns. Some of the houses and barns are still standing. In those days, barns were built of big timbers which we had to cut down and hew. That country,

in the bare opening, was more or less covered with an undergrowth of black oak brush. It had to be broke up with a big plow in six or seven yoke of oxen. The breaking season, from May 10 to July 10, I followed for 10 years. At night we drop the yokes and the chains, right in the furrow and let the cattle run at large. Getting up at day light and hunting them in wet grass from your knees up to your neck, and afoot at that, was no fun. We often traipsed through the brush and grass until 10 o'clock, and sometimes longer.

In 1859, I first came to Nebraska. Drove an ox team for my brother, William, who now lives at Brady, Nebraska. Stayed only long enough to build him a log house on Turkey Creek and then started back to Wisconsin, on foot, with a rifle, grip sack and 35¢ in cash. Walked through the beautiful but desolate prairies to Atchison. Worked and paid my passage down the Missouri and up the Mississippi and got home with 50¢ in cash and a very severe attack of ague.

On April 14, was married to Polly Peckham, a neighbor girl, who still boards with me. Bought 60 acres of land, built a house and lived in it during the Civil War. Wanted more room, so took Greeley's advice and came west in 1865. Stopped one year near Waterloo, Iowa. Had a very severe attack of typhoid fever which cut deep into our purse. So concluded to move on to where land was still cheaper. Came to Nebraska in October, 1866. Took a homestead and entered more land 1 mile south of the village of Steiner. Hauled green cottonwood lumber from the Missouri River with oxen and built a shack in which we live for seven years. Then left the place in charge of my brother, Ed, and moved to a new place north of town where our son, Charlie, now lives. Our new house burned down in just one year from the time it was built. No insurance. Total loss. \$1500. Borrowed money from (somebody) and built again.

Lived there 19 years. Did fairly well. Went in debt for more land but on account of poor health, left the place and came to town 12 years ago.

*(Mildred: and I think they came to town in 1894.)*

Since which time my general health has increased somewhat. Never dabbled in politics. Never sought nor wanted office. I served on school boards several times. Road supervisor... ditto. And raised a family of seven children: two boys and five girls, all of whom are married and comfortably fixed.

*(Mildred: and that's the end. Oh, he wasn't in politics but boy! They'd have voted the Republican ticket if it had been a yellow dog running! They voted that straight.)*

## Polly Peckham Atkinson

*Mildred: And then here's the one that grandma wrote for her club telling about how they lived up at Steiner. This was written for Pioneer Days, April 22, I think, ought 4.*

Now I'm not equal to writing a paper on Pioneer days. So let me tell you a few instances of my own life and my observations. In the first place, when I was a little girl I remember the Cattaraugus Indians used to come to our neighborhood every year to fish and to make splint baskets and almost all kinds of beadwork and trinkets. They were camped about a mile from our house on a little creek. One night, after school, my mother told me I might take some eggs and go to their camp and buy me a basket. It was nearly dark when I got to the camp there.

*(Mildred: Now I don't know if this was when they lived in Wisconsin or when they lived in New York before grandma's people moved to Wisconsin.)*

The young Indians thought that they would give me a scare and have some fun with me and, sure enough, they did. They started after me and I ran and they ran too. I was a pretty good runner in those days. I ran all the way home. That was the last time I ever went to their camp.

When we came to Nebraska it was pretty new. When we crossed the river at Nebraska City I thought that we were going out of this world. We moved in a prairie schooner and carried all of our worldly possessions in or on the wagon. When we came in sight of the place that was to be our home, I just cried. It was all burnt over, not a house or any improvement of any description on our side of the creek and only Germans on the other side and yet they proved to be good neighbors after we became acquainted with them. **But the gift that hides in the future is hard to discover through tears.** My husband hustled about and built us a shanty. He had to go to the river to get lumber to build it out of and that was just cottonwood lumber at that. There was no nearer place that he could get it at that time. **We had only been there three weeks when the baby came...**

**(Mildred: That was Aunt Jen.)**

That home was 1 ½ mile south of where Steiner is now. From that day, our Pioneer life began. I was afraid of the Indians all of the time. Their trail was only about 40 yards from our house and we were so far from town her neighbors. At times there were a

great many things we had to have that we couldn't get that my husband had to go to St. Joe (*St. Joseph, Missouri*) or Nebraska City to get as there was no town nearer than the river at that time.

Grasshoppers and drought destroyed our crops. My husband had to be away from home a good deal breaking prairie in the Spring and thrashing in Fall. I was left to attend the home and the children. These were dark days for me or would have been even more so only for love, but love makes the world go round and makes home happy and we certainly had a good share of that commodity and that is what kept us from getting utterly discouraged. We hadn't a friend in the neighbors for miles in all our old friends in our old home were far away My husband wrote a poem for our 40<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary which portrays a little of the trials of those days. With your permission I will write that here.

*(Note: This poem and others written by JC Atkinson – and a few by his son John Edwin Atkinson – were collected in a small book in 1906. It was called “The Stray Thoughts of a Lifetime: Promiscuous Impressions Verified” and contains many poems written for family and friends as well as reflections on life. Number of members of our family have copies of this book.)*

## **To Mama – On Our 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary** *JC Atkinson to Polly Peckham Atkinson*

Do you mind the day with that we were wed  
Just 40 years ago?  
You blushed at what the preacher said  
But could not answer no.

To sail the matrimonial sea,  
And either steer or row;  
You stepped into the boat with me  
Just 40 years ago.

It must have caused sad tears to fall –  
Took pluck of high degree –  
To leave home, parents, friends, and all,  
And cast your lot with me.

What we’ve been through in all these years,  
Our bark tossed to and fro;  
How much impelled by hopes or fears –  
How much of joy, or grief, or tears,  
You and I, alone can know.

Sometimes we’ve had it bright and clear,  
And sometimes cloudy weather;  
But which your lot to row or steer,  
We’ve tried to pull together.

You’ve been a good and faithful wife,  
Ever standing near me;  
To share the joys or ills of life,  
To see, advise, and share me.

I think of how you clung to me,  
And never hesitated;  
When, per advice of Horace G.,  
We westward immigrated.

When fever-stricken, low I lay,  
And must die, the doctor said;  
You watched and nursed me night and day,  
And never left my bed.

When slowly I began to mend,  
All grateful for new lease of life,  
The doctor said, “No thanks, my friend,  
But thank your noble wife.”

And this I know, if I were dead,  
Had heard the last dread call;  
You, of all the bitter tears, would shed  
The bitterest tears of all.

Whoever first is called to go,  
Will leave a heart bereft,  
To drain the bitter dregs of woe –  
God help the one that’s left.

We immigrated all alone,  
We had no kindred here;  
We hoped to get a home our own,  
Before land got too dear.

As day by day I tilled the land,  
And strove to get a start,  
You freely gave a helping hand  
As you had done your heart.

You struggled hard, both soon and late,  
Our daily bread to win;  
Had I the key of Heaven’s Gate  
You should be welcomed in.

We've had a fairly prosperous life –  
Have little cause to grumble;  
We've shied the rock – domestic strife –  
On which so many stumble.

We've reared a lot of girls and boys –  
To us they're no discredit;  
The book that tells of richer joys –  
That book I've never read it.

We see them almost every day,  
We're always glad to own 'em;  
And if we have a word to say  
To absent ones, we phone 'em.

And then, sometimes, they all are here,  
A reg'lar family union,  
All mingling glad, with home's good cheer,  
Sweet friendship and communion.

They are deserving, one and all,  
Our best and kindest wishes;  
If ever soup from heaven fall,  
May they have spoons and dishes.

That they may battle for the right,  
With the zeal both true and fervent,  
Live lives of constant, pure delight,  
So praise their humble servant.

When we came here the place was new,  
'Twas then a territory;  
But our experience to review  
Would be too long a story.

Nebraska held inducements great,  
For winning immigration;  
She's now a grand and prosp'rous state,  
In this our glorious nation.

We've seen her prairies dotted o'er,  
With many a thrifty dwelling;  
What lies for her in future store,  
There's scarcely any telling.

We've had our ups and down, 'tis true –  
Have had things to annoy us;  
We have, at times, felt mighty blue;  
At other times, been joyous.

We've felt the winds blow hot and dry,  
From Mexico and Texas;  
And when our crops began to die,  
It seemed enough to vex us.

We've seen the 'hoppers swipe our corn,  
Our summer's hope and labor;  
And if our visage looked forlorn,  
We looked just like our neighbor.

And when they'd sapped the very dregs  
On which our bread depended,  
They layed the ground chock full of eggs,  
And thus the curse extended.

We've seen the chintz bugs kill our wheat  
So dead that you could burn it;  
Before we could have bread to eat,  
We must go out and earn it.

Somehow, we've always got along,  
Been fairly well contented;  
Of all who came, we're not among  
The few who have repented.

We backward view that distant day,  
In retrospect discerning;  
Alas! How many have gone the way  
From which there's no returning.

'Tis sad to think since we were wed  
Of all whom we have known;  
Friends and schoolmates, mostly dead –  
We're almost left alone.

While thinking of those friends so dear,  
By cruel death bereft us;  
Let's not forget to help and cheer  
The very few that's left us.

While swift we near the Stygian beach  
With feeble pulse and slow;  
We'll be as kind and true to each,  
As forty years ago.

**J.C. Atkinson**  
**April 14, 1901**