

Postal History of Iowa

By WOODROW W. WESTHOLM*
Secretary Iowa Postal History Society

Iowa, as we know it, is a gem in an elegant setting. It is rich in history. It was first seen by white men when Marquette and Joliet touched the west bank of the Mississippi river in 1673.

From 1803, when it secured its first formal government by the famous Louisiana Purchase, as a part of that territory, through successive transfers from Indiana, Missouri, Michigan, Wisconsin to Iowa territories and finally statehood in 1846, it has steadily developed its resources.

Likewise, the postal history of Iowa is an interesting study. It is impossible to develop research material without an appreciation for or an understanding of the events that made our postal system a necessary part of our business and social life. Through the preservation of correspondence we have been able to trace the stages of development as the people moved into, then across the state. Postmarks trace the pioneer settlements, some of which have grown to large cities whereas others have long since served their purpose and are no longer even remembered by the present generation.

The postal system in Iowa dates from 1833 the first postoffice being established in Dubuque (then called Dubuque's Mines) on May 27th. True enough there were settlers in Iowa prior to that time. No doubt they sent messages to their families and friends or in connection with their business but it was, at the very best a difficult task. When Missouri became a state in 1821, this region reverted to its unorganized status and for 13 years had no semblance of government. Traders

*A paper delivered by Mr. Westholm Sept. 25, 1954, at the annual meeting of the Trans-Mississippi Philatelic Society and the Iowa Postal History Society, at Omaha, Nebraska, winning the Philatelic Congress trophy for first in excellence delivered on the program.

and trappers roamed the region, had their fur trading posts and other establishments, but no settlements could legally be made.

Usually wars between the Indian tribes were fought without interference by the government authorities, but when the Sioux descended on the lead mining regions around Dubuque and drove out the legitimate owners, the Sac and Fox Indians, troops under Lt. Jefferson Davis (later President of the Confederate States) were dispatched to expel the usurpers. Following the successful conclusion of the Black Hawk War, United States forced the Sac and Fox Indians to make a cession of the Iowa land bordering the Mississippi River. The Black Hawk Treaty was signed on September 15, 1832, at Fort Armstrong, on Rock Island, in the Mississippi river. This region was not opened to settlement until 1833.

On several occasions the soldiers marched out from Fort Armstrong and Fort Crawford to forcibly remove those who were squatting on the land. The lack of laws in the region caused a great deal of trouble. To give the region some status in law and court it was attached to Michigan Territory in 1834 and divided into DuBuque & DeMoyné counties. At this time the first Fort Des Moines was established on the Mississippi river, at the present site of Montrose, by Col. Stephen W. Kearney. This post was garrisoned until 1837, when the troops were removed to Fort Leavenworth.

It is not difficult, under these circumstances, to understand why it was some years from the time white men first roamed the region until they could permanently establish their homes and make their livelihood here that a need for post offices and their services was required.

A comparison of the population statistics indicates there were but 50 whites in Iowa in 1832, but by 1836, only four years later, there were 10,531. And just two years later in 1838 this figure had more than doubled, numbering 22,589. This rapid growth all up and down

the Mississippi river and also up the lower reaches of the Des Moines river created a need for postal service.

CONDITIONS IN EARLY DAYS

The settlers who lived in Iowa during the early days mingled work with play, and although they had many hard experiences, they also had many good times. Everything was very rude and primitive, and a great deal of what we today regard as necessities the pioneers considered as luxuries. As there were no railroads here then, the settlers depended entirely upon horses and oxen, and, in some instances, supplies were brought in on an occasional steamer. As soon as possible after a territory was opened up the government established military and territorial roads, but before this was done the settlers had made their own highways and byways. The first roads followed the old Indian trails. As there were no fences the settlers drove over the prairie in all directions. Mails were few and far between. For some time postage was twenty-five cents a letter. If a settler was too poor to pay this, the good natured man who acted as postmaster would trust him until the sum was available. The post office was at some store, and mail was received at irregular intervals, according as the conditions of the roads and of navigation assisted or hindered. Settlers rode many miles to get their letters. More specifically, postage rates during the early days of settlement, as governed by the Act of March 3, 1825 were based according to distance mail was carried. Not over 30 miles, 6 cents; 30 to 80 miles, 10 cents; 80 to 150 miles, 12½ cents; 150 to 400 miles, 18¾ cents; over 400 miles, 25 cents. The Act of March 3, 1845 reduced rates to two classifications; under 300 miles, 5 cents; over 300 miles, 10 cents. In 1855 letters could be carried 3,000 miles for 3 cents, over 3,000 miles for 10 cents. Finally, in 1863, an ordinary letter could be carried any distance in the United States for 3 cents.

Soon after Governor Lucas entered upon his duties as the first chief executive of Iowa Territory, a letter was addressed to him, at Burlington, Iowa, by the

officials at Washington. Evidently the people out East knew little of events on the Upper Mississippi, for the letter went to Burlington, New Jersey, was returned to Washington, was sent out, this time to Burlington, Vermont, and again came back to Washington. The postmaster was disgusted. He wrote on the letter, "For heaven's sake let this letter go to some other Burlington, wherever it may be!" There were no envelopes in those days and the great wafer sealing the letter with the writing of the postmaster under the address, caused considerable comment.

Mail came weekly to Burlington, the first territorial capital. It was brought from the East to Indianapolis by stage coach; thence by two-horse hack to Iowa. From Burlington mail was taken by hack to Davenport and by horseback riders to Dubuque. Before Iowa was a territory letters were addressed, "Iowa Post Office, Black Hawk Purchase, Wisconsin Territory."

IOWA RIVERS FIRST HIGHWAYS

The rivers were Iowa's first highways and were much larger than they are now. The Iowa, Des Moines, Cedar and even the Turkey River were thought to be navigable. Today the Mississippi and the Missouri may be said to be the only navigable streams in Iowa. The first steamboat to pass along Iowa's eastern border was the "Virginia", which in 1823, carried supplies to Prairie du Chien. The pioneer steamboat on the Des Moines was the "S. B. Science, Captain Clark," which made a short trip in the fall of 1837. The steamer "Ione" landed troops and supplies at Racoon Fork in August of 1843 where the capital city of Iowa now stands. This became a busy route during the next few years until the stage and railroad took the steamer's place. Some of these lines held government contracts to carry the mail and "Steamboat" or "Steam" markings on early covers verify and portray this interesting phase of our early postal history.

Until the coming of the railroad, and for many years after the building of the first lines the stage answered the general demands of inland travel and traffic. Frink

and Walker was the company operating the first stages in Iowa. In 1854 the Western Stage Company succeeded the older concern. The mail routes covered by these stages were important to the rapidly expanding businesses and gave a more commercial atmosphere to the postal service that had seen its beginning in the irregular steamer-trips and the post rider.

The first rail on Iowa soil was laid in May, 1854. By the end of 1855 there were sixty-seven miles of track in operation. January 1, 1856, the first train pulled into Iowa City, the westernmost station of Iowa. In August, 1866, the first train entered Des Moines over the Des Moines Valley road. In about six months, or in February, 1867, a locomotive arrived at Council Bluffs. Steam had succeeded horses. Iowa's stage coach days were drawing to a close. It was not until July 1, 1870, however, that the last old coach left Des Moines for Indianola.

With the coming of the railroad, postal service in Iowa was again improved. On August 28, 1864 the first trip of the U.S. Railway Postoffice was completed from Chicago to Clinton. The trip proved successful and thereafter the growth of the railway mail service was quite rapid. All route agents became railway postal clerks by 1890, and postmarks changed from Agt. to R. P. O.

Rural free delivery service was established under President Cleveland in 1896. Air mail service in Iowa commenced in 1920, when a through service between New York and San Francisco was attempted, but this service was not continuous, since the mail was carried by train at night. It became apparent that the service to be really worth while must be operated day and night. The first through day and night service was inaugurated July 1, 1924. In more recent years, as the passenger and mail trains have been withdrawn from lines on which small towns no longer supported the service, Star-routes and highway post offices have continued to furnish postal service. This latter type of service has become quite popular in Iowa, so much that

neatly arranged on album pages together with a brief description of the cover, the town or the contents of the letter.

Postal History of Iowa is interesting as it helps us better appreciate the mail service we are presently enjoying. By study and research we can learn the history of our State in a much more personal manner, visualizing the circumstances connected with each cover. Many new friends may be added to one's acquaintance in the search for "ghost town" and other historically interesting covers. And finally, and this is important, postal history collectors are helping to preserve documentary evidence of the growth and advancement of our postal system which might otherwise be destroyed and forgotten.

These facts serve only to bring by outline the postal history of Iowa; a more detailed study is necessary to thoroughly understand and appreciate its definite growth, step by step. For example, the following list of Territorial postoffices indicates the years in which they were begun:

1833

Dubuque

1834

Fort Des Moines No. 1

1836

Burlington, Clark's Ferry, Davenport, Fort Madison, Keokuk, Montpelier, Parkhurst, Peru.

1837

Augusta, Black Hawk, Bloomington, Camanche, Farmington, Pleasant Valley, Rock Creek, Rockingham, Salisbury, Moscow, Mount Pleasant, New Lexington, Sanbornton, Wapello, Waubesa, Waubesa, Waubesa.

1838

Bentonsport, Cedarville, Deventerville, Geneva, Grandview, Jacksonville, Montrose, New London, Portoro, West Liberty, Wyoming.

1839

Charleston, Salem, West Point.

1841

Ambrosia, Andrew, Bally Clough Grove, Berlin, Birmingham, Bloomfield, Blue Grass, Brighton, Cascade, Cedar River, Columbus City, Dodgeville, Edinburg, Fairfield, Fair Haven, Florence,

Fox, Franklin, Fredonia, Glendale, Harrisburg, Harrison, Hartford, Hickory Grove, Hope Farm, Indian Prairie, Iowa City, Iowaville, Lockridge, Lowell, Lyons, Marion, Millville, Nashville, Pamaho, Philadelphia, Pleasant Grove, Point Pleasant, Portland, Pottsville, Powassheek, Prairie House, Prairie La Porte, Princeton, Richland, Rising Sun, Rome, Solon, Springfield, Spring Rock, Tete de Mort, Tipton, Toolesborough, Trenton, Tuscarora, Van Buren, Vandenburg, Virginia Grove, Walnut Fork, Washington, Wickliffe, Winchester, Yatton.

1842

Bonaparte, Parks.

1843

Crooked Creek, String Prairie, Wabasha.

From this it is easy to see that 1841 was an especially important year in the postal service growth; but many more were organized in 1846, when statehood was attained.

Historian Bess Aldrich

If future Americans, a thousand years from now, desire to recover the authentic flavor of pioneer life in the midwest, they can do no better than turn to the historical novels of Bess Streeter Aldrich.

First-comers to this wilderness toward the middle of the nineteenth century were too busy establishing their homesteads to write much history. The second generation was too involved in establishing new schools and developing new methods of agriculture on the lands their fathers had cleared. It remained for the third generation, with perspective, but still with access to original sources, to write the story.

Bess Streeter Aldrich, who died this week in Lincoln, Nebr., had unique qualifications for this task. Her grandfather, Zimri Streeter, was the original settler on the family farm near Cedar Falls, obtaining title from the government. He was a member of the first legislature to meet in Des Moines. Although old Zimri died before Bess was born, her childhood was filled with talk of the founding of a new state and the adventures of the pioneers.

Black Hawk county's interest in Bess Streeter Aldrich might therefore be excused on the basis of local

pride. But, while we can give testimony on the authenticity of her historical data, the American public as a whole acclaimed her story-telling talents and the sweetness of her personality as revealed in her books. "Song of Years" was a best-seller in its day and still is a favorite in library circulation lists. The universal appeal of her stories is shown by the fact that this novel was translated into five foreign languages for publication abroad.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of Mrs. Aldrich's historical novels is the way they revealed, without any conscious attempt to do so, the way the American tradition—dating from the days of the Magna Carta and the American Revolution—was transplanted into the wilderness. The pioneers were faced with backbreaking toil, staggering economic reverses and a life that could have made them dull and coarse. But never for more than a moment did this hardship and monotony dull their high spirit nor extinguish their faith that a society of free and equal men could establish a better way of life on this continent.

Bess Streeter Aldrich was our historian and we are deeply grieved that she is gone. But, through her talents and painstaking research, she has left an honest and inspiring monument in her books. Surely those works will endure because of their simplicity, their absorbing plots and their accurate portrayal of a way of life that is now gone. Thus Bess Streeter Aldrich has herself become an important part of the rich American heritage from the past.—*Waterloo Courier*.

The Poetry of Seeing and Telling

The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something, and tell what it saw in a plain way. Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see. To see clearly is poetry, prophecy and religion all in one.

—JOHN RUSKIN.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.