

Social Notes From The 1880's

"High Society" life in Iowa during the 1880's had a considerable following in the press. In fact "society" affairs were so much the thing in those days that several newspapers were established devoted exclusively to social matters and manners. One newspaper in circulation was the *Saturday Evening Mail Car*, published in Des Moines. This paper featured detailed coverage of all the "in" parties (and some strictly "out" parties) along with the local gossip; and page after page in each issue was given entirely to the latest fashion news for the correct Lady and Gentleman. When should a young man sport a cane and gloves, or what bonnet with what kind of parasol was proper for a lady were typical questions eagerly sought and answered many times over. It is amusing to read these fashion columns, and even more humorous are the very serious letters sent in to the editor describing the latest party events. Here is an example from the *Mail Car*:

NEWTON GOSSIP

Dearest Mollie:

I received your very welcome letter a few days ago. I counted ten Hallowe'en parties. Two or three of them were "seek and find" parties. One sent out invitations to the boys like this: "Hallowe'en! Find us if you can. If successful, supper at ten at J. J. Vaughan's. X. Y. Z." The girls hid at J. H. McCalmont's and remained there in security until after ten. Another party had supper at Della Kennedy's, the girls hiding at Mr. Forbes'. Another had supper at Stella Townsend's and hid at T. R. Rodgers'. Mr. and Mrs. Frank Wilson had a party of young married folks, who spent the evening merrily. A club of eleven girls gave a picnic party at Mr. Robinson's. There were "taffy-pulls" at Col. Ryan's and Jas. Eastman's and small gatherings at Mrs. Maggie Lamb's and Robert McGhee's. Mrs. Lizzie Hunter gave a delightful party on Tuesday evening in honor of Mr. and Mrs. Jas. W. Hunter of Des

Moines. Mrs. Hunter wore her wedding dress, an ecru-colored silk, made with one whole side of ecru satin, with red velvet roses brocaded on it. It was very handsome. Mrs. Frank A. Campbell, the "next newest bride," wore a steel-colored silk brightened with red ribbons, and red satin slippers. It made me think of the couplet—

Her dainty feet like little mice,
Peeped slyly in and out.

Mrs. James A. Kerr wore dark red velvet, Miss Pet Wilson, blue silk with a lace flounced front, which had cream-colored roses on it. Invitations have been received to the wedding of Miss Cora McCord, of Ord, Neb., to a gentleman of that place. She visited here last summer. Goodnight. Write soon.

Yours ever, EDNA

Apparently with all this hub-bub going on, some wry, witty mind happened along and thought it all worth satirizing; for out came a newspaper of unknown editorship, published in Des Moines in the early 1880's, entitled the *Saturday Evening Flat Car*. The *Flat Car* was a spoof on society, using all the devices known to satire to mock society manners and values. The mystery editor said in one of the first editions he put out that he would like to disclose his identity but felt entirely unworthy of doing so. His reason being that he was born in 1862 and consequently had no war record.

In the serious society papers, Heaven forbade the editor to disclose the real names of those among the elite who wrote gossip letters to be published. This brings us to "Jessie's Letter" from the *Flat Car* which is not only humorous but also informs us, as well as any legitimate letter, about society affairs of the period and the importance attached to them.

The Saturday Evening Flat Car.

Devoted Exclusively to Society Matters.

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DES MOINES, IOWA, MAY 1, 1880.

TEN CENTS.

JESSIE'S LETTER

DEAR NELL: Just imagine Dear Nell, I've been asked to become a regular contributor to the FLAT CAR — a "regular contributor." I've always wanted to write for the press, but now that my ambition is about to be realized it causes my heart to flutter, just as a pot of boiling lard is caused to sputter when a cold potato is dropped into it. I think it's just real awful jolly and nice to be a regular contributor, especially to a paper like the FLAT Car, and so long as no one knows who I am. At first I regarded the invitation as a joke, but being assured that the editor was in earnest I flew to him, and hereafter, Nell, you may expect a weekly letter from your old chum to be one of the features of the FLAT CAR.

Such a gay winter as we have had in Des Moines, Nell, and how I wish you could have been here to help me enjoy our social festivities and amusements. So many grand receptions and parties, and dances, and taffy pullings, and minstrel shows, and sociables and weddings and funerals and christenings — assuredly the gayest season ever enjoyed in Iowa's beautiful capital city. We have had a right smart of newcomers here in the past few months, so many in fact that I am beginning to lose my identity and to think that I am somebody else. I've hinted to Charley several times that I thought as much, but Charlie doesn't seem to be in as great a hurry to make me somebody else as I am to be somebody else. The city is growing more and more metropolitan every day. The pork-packing establishments have been doing an extensive business, a glucose factory has begun operations and the receptions of the winter have been just the dearest and darlingest things out.

The latest addition to our Society is Catharine McGinnis. I haven't met her personally, but ma and I passed her yesterday. I saw her on the street with her mother. Both were dressed in exquisite style and killing taste and are evidently ladies of wealth and refinement. I understand Catharine is quite popular, notwithstanding some of the girls in our set al-

ways look with disfavor upon new-comers who come in for a division of the attention and favors they have so long been in undisputed possession of. For my part I am real glad to welcome every addition to Des Moines who, in appearance or sociability, is likely to add to the city in the estimation of visitors and strangers.

I do wish, Nell, that we owned a mule team and buggy. I would ride down town every day and pretend to be busy shopping. I notice there are certain ladies in Des Moines who seem to have little else to do. I never go down street, forenoon or afternoon, but I see them in their buggies or carriages, driving from store to store, as if they were buying whole vehicle loads of goods. Some of them are country women who bring in fresh eggs, butter and other agricultural productions to sell.

At the last entertainment by the Turners at their hall, I counted nine or ten couples of "our set" who were present. I noticed Dr. James and Aunt Judy and I thought to myself "what a fine couple they are." I also noticed Mr. Walter Scott with Miss Will Daugherty; Hollo Persimmon, G. L. with the new-comer spoken of above, Miss Catherine McGinnis; Lew Stewart with Miss Foster Ross; Sam Lung with Sally Sin, Will Battell with Mr. Paywatt. I believe you have never met Wobbett Paywatt, as he came after your departure, but he is perfectly gorgeous and real jolly. In the words of our beloved FLAT CAR, long may he wave!

I had a notion to tell you also of several prominent young men who came in *alone* but Charlie said I had better not, as they would be real spunky and might not ask me to dance with them, and that would make me feel so bad.

Do you know, Nell, that Charlie is getting to be real mean with me; he hasn't presented me with a bottle of perfume for a month and I have thrown out some pretty *strong* hints that I needed some. The weather is getting warm and perfumery saves lots of work. It is almost equal to a disinfectant — isn't it, Nell?

This afternoon I met Dr. James on Fourth street. Do you remember him, Nell? He lifts his hat to one so prettily.

Charlie told me sometime ago, that he was the best versed in Society etiquette of any young man in the city, I think he's sweet and I enjoy conversing or dancing with him, he is so affectionate, Dr. James is.

In my next, dear Nell, I will tell you about a couple of engagements in high life. I might mention one this week. Will Battell has engaged a new washerwoman. The reasons are obvious.

Nell, dear, you have no idea how much I think of Charlie. I would be almost willing to forsake Society for the sake of becoming his wife — if he would only ask me, but Charlie is wedded to Society.

But I must draw this epistle to a close, dear Nell. You must write me soon. Tell me all about who your fellows are and maybe I'll get your letter inserted in the FLAT CAR.

Take care of yourself. Bye, bye.

Your's more than anybody else's

Jessie.

That Was The Day That Was

BY LIDA L. GREENE

The Day promised to be pleasantly ordinary. In First Floor West long tables were stacked with books and brief cases; heads were bent over page and manuscript. Once in awhile someone stopped in the door to look up at the Little General on his horse. We were beginning to feel complacent. All was peace and usualness—until the phone rang, that is.

Mr. Jack Musgrove, the Curator, was calling. The office of the Secretary of State had phoned Mr. Musgrove with the information that a New York book firm was offering the 1844 Iowa constitution for sale at three thousand five hundred dollars. The document was an original, they believed. Shouldn't the State of Iowa buy it, they wanted to know.

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