

SOME CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES IN THE EARLY AND PRESENT HISTORY OF SOUTH-WESTERN IOWA.

BY CHARLES A. WHITE, M. D., STATE GEOLOGIST.

Although within the memory of a large part of the inhabitants of Iowa, the untutored savage held undisputed possession of her soil, no one will pretend for a moment to regard our present civilization as a developement from that savage condition.

We often express ourselves in terms of honest pride of our present and prospective condition as a section of a great nation; yet we do not forget that our civilization is one of transplanting, not of germination and developement upon our own soil. When I say transplanting, it is of course desired that a territorial, not a national transplanting, should be understood. In other words, it is not an introduction of a previously developed civilization to an inferior nation, but an expansive and progressive colonization upon adjacent territory, of communities and families from the parent stock, who carry with them in full maturity, all of the principles, ideas and aspirations which have raised the nations from which they sprung, from ancient barbarism.

It is to these motives, which now urge themselves to such untiring exertion to lay the foundations for their family fortunes, as well as of the social and educational institutions which they have learned to value still more highly, that our rapid advancement in the introduction of the appliances of civilization upon new territory is due. These motives being ever present, our new communities, unlike those of the colonies of other nations, enjoying equal political privileges with the old, the measure of their advancement will be in direct ratio with the abundance of natural resources which the new territory contains, and the natural obstacles to be overcome.

The natural resources of the eastern part of the State are abundant and well distributed, and with the exception of a less supply of timber and building stone, the western part is

equally desirable. Yet notwithstanding the fact that natural advantages have been somewhat in favor of the eastern part, its conquest to civilization was effected more slowly than the same process is now being accomplished for the western part. Reflecting that, next to a thorough system of education, unrestricted inter-communication is the most indispensable element of human advancement, the reasons for this, are quite apparent; at least to those whose memory goes back to the introduction of railroads into the west.

When Iowa first began to be settled, no railroad had yet traversed either New York or Pennsylvania, and none existed in all the region westward from those States. For many years after its first settlement, the only commercial communication Iowa had with the civilized world, was by way of the Mississippi river, which was then as now, unnavigable during one-third of the year. All manufactured articles were then imported. The people were too poor to establish good schools, or even in some cases to pay the government price for the land which they had begun to improve, and which then fell into the hands of the speculators. In the process of acclimation, and also from unwonted exposure, many sickened and some died, in consequence of which the belief became general in the older States, that it was an actual sacrifice of human life to emigrate to the west. Amid all these obstacles, it is not strange that advancement was comparatively slow, until eastern enterprise, combined with western energy, pushed forward their railroads until they reached our borders. From that time our progress has been a wonder to ourselves.

It is not our present intention to trace this progress, but only to refer to some of the circumstances attending it, and more especially to some of the means which have been, and are now being employed to accomplish the same result in Western Iowa.

In the early settlement of the eastern part of the State, a greater proportion of the lands sold by the government fell into the hands of actual settlers, than has been the case in the western part. In 1855-6, when speculation ran riot all over

the country, the wild lands of the west were so eagerly bought up by speculators, that in many districts, very few actual settlers were so fortunate as to secure enough for their own homes. The financial trouble which followed those years, left the purchasers, or their creditors, in legal possession of those formerly coveted lands, at a greatly reduced market value, and the business of the State also so completely prostrated, that the pioneer settlers were reduced to a condition approaching an utter destitution of everything except the means of mere animal existence.

Here were families scattered over a wide extent of beautiful country, far away from the nearest means of social, religious and educational advantages, such as they had learned to love and value at their former homes, and farther still from those early homes and friends, too poor to build churches and school houses, and too few to fill them if they were built. No roads by which they might communicate with their nearest, yet distant neighbors, had yet been constructed, and they were not able, of their own means, to construct any.

It was with such difficulties as these, that those pioneer settlers had to contend, and we can only wonder that they still continued to hope on, and to cherish those principles which had actuated them from the beginning. It has been the good fortune of the writer to meet many of these men and women at their own firesides, and hear them tell of the strange circumstances which have surrounded them, and of their strong faith in a better temporal future for their children, and he is not ashamed to say that the recollections of the honest, open-hearted hospitality he has received beneath their humble roofs, are among the pleasantest reminiscences of his life.

In progress of time, railroads began gradually to be pushed westward from the Mississippi river, and the western pioneers as gradually to improve their condition; but although settlements increased, the larger part of the lands were still owned by non-residents of the State, who refused to sell them at the price which actual settlers could afford to pay for them,

because such a price was much less than they had cost themselves in former years.

Education and inter-communication being, as the settlers well knew, the principal elements of advancement, they resorted to precisely the same means to procure them, as is always done in other communities; namely, taxation. Land speculation had been one of the greatest evils with which they had to contend, in their first settlement, but it now resulted in positive advantage to them. If all the land, except that which they had purchased for themselves, had remained unsold by the government, it could not have been taxed for any purpose; but the land being all sold, and therefore taxable, they were enabled to raise the means to build school-houses, pay teachers, and construct their roads. Counties and townships were organized, the "resident inhabitants" of which, were indeed, in some cases, very few, but were always sufficiently numerous to fill all the necessary offices, and taxes were levied upon *all* the property, for State, county, school and road purposes. Non-resident property holders were opposed to these measures, because their property, being unimproved, was not productive to them, since the chances of speculation were gone, and they often complained that the assessment upon the land was high, while that upon the improvements, was almost nothing. On the other hand, the settlers contended that those improvements added value to the neighboring lands, without which, they would have yet been a part of the unbroken wilderness, and that their improvements were never available in the market for anything approaching a fair valuation of the labor employed in making them. They also contended that it was the intention of the speculators, that the value of their lands should be enhanced by the labors of the settlers, and that the only reason why their expectations were not fulfilled, was because settlement did not progress as fast as they expected. A striking exhibition of this policy, on the part of the speculators, and its failure, remains to this day, as seen in the town of Mt. Ayr, the county seat of Ringgold county. A definite bargain is

said to have been made by them, with those who were charged with the location of the county seat, that the lots of one-half of the town plat, in the centre of which is a public square, should be open for purchase by the public, and that the speculators should hold the other half at their own discretion. The town was then strangely divided into two equal parts, by a line running north and south through the centre. The eastern half is now built up into a neat little country town, with the public square upon its western side, northward and southward, from which runs the enchanted line, which the spirit of improvement refuses to pass; while the western half, is all an open prairie, without a house, fence, or tree upon it. All the land in the immediate vicinity of the town, is also held by non-residents, so that not only is the county seat built upon one-half of its legitimate plat alone, but that half is only an outpost in relation to the cultivated part of the county, although near its geographical centre.

It is no part of my intention to discuss the merits of this question, between the interests of the resident and non-resident property owners of western Iowa, but only to refer to these circumstances, to convey a knowledge of the means made use of by the scattered inhabitants, to provide for the comfort and safety of their families, and for the education of their children. The remarks already made, and those to follow, also, are intended to apply more especially to the southwestern quarter of the State, since the observations of the writer have been principally confined to that region. Whatever may be said upon this subject, it cannot be denied that the plans adopted by the settlers, have resulted in laying secure foundations for the future prosperity of their portion of the State. This is apparent to every one who visits that region, and the traveler is often surprised to come suddenly upon a well built, and neatly painted school-house, with the interior arrangements of the most approved kind, and the first question he asks himself is, "where do the scholars come from?" The question can usually be answered, by going to the highest ground in the vicinity, which will not be very

high above the general level, and as his view will not probably be obstructed by a heavy growth of forest trees, his vision will have a nearly unobstructed range for several miles, in almost all directions. Here and there, wherever a small grove fixes his attention, and the surrounding fields of luxuriant corn, stand like oases upon the grassy plain, he will discover an humble roof, which, in almost all cases, covers a poorer structure than the school-house, near which he stands, so patiently do its inmates await and anticipate the "good time coming" for their children.

Should he have occasion to go upon the by-roads, he will usually find safe bridges across the streams, often several miles away from any habitation, even when the road, although unbroken, is indistinct from unfrequent travel. These are rendered necessary, in most cases, from the fact that many, even of the smaller streams, are always quite impassible, in consequence of their steep banks of soft mud, derived from the deep soil, and sub-soil of the region. The country is well drained, and consequently very healthful. The roads, not being yet obstructed by numerous farms, are usually upon the "divides," between the "sloughs," or slight depressions, which drain the land, and, although the distance is often increased by their location there, they are almost always dry and in good condition, without labor—the principal labor required upon them, being the construction of bridges, and crossings, for the moist places occasioned by the sloughs.

Very many other influences have operated, and are now operating, to make Western Iowa a desirable and delightful region, and to fill it with an intelligent and prosperous population; but it has been my purpose to speak particularly only of the manner in which the first settlers made use of those two great means of advancement, education and inter-communication.

Future generations of children of that interesting region, will have cause to be thankful for the results which will flow from circumstances that caused their pioneer forefathers so much solicitude and privation, and those who engaged in the speculative enterprises referred to, such severe pecuniary losses

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