

TRANSPORTATION IN IOWA BEFORE THE RAILROADS

BY E. R. HARLAN

Romance is rooted in the movement of man from one country to another, from one home to another. In that movement are the trials of battle, the freaks of fortune, the thrills of love.

No era of American civil life has ever been so filled with the rending of home ties and establishing of new homes and households in remote places and under new conditions as that from the beginning of the government in Iowa to the universal introduction of the railway and telegraph. Not only the entire area of Iowa, but most of the country north and west of it, was in this era populated by permanent home makers, and overlaid by the fabric of well ordered society. Both the people and the rules and ideals of social life were brought out of the older portions of America literally "by wagon."

It follows, then, that at the beginning of the state the thin film of civilized life was spread through the interior by the then best facilities of horse-drawn vehicles for the well to do, and with conveyances for the less favored shading down to the zealous man afoot. By the time all our lands were "taken up" and the Civil War was ended, the hordes on foot and the caravans on wheel were taken up by the speedy railroad trains. Only local trips remained for wagons, save for a few who for economy's sake transported themselves and families to new homes west of the Missouri and east of the Rockies.

So our state beginnings saw the stage coach endings. As the swarms of people settled down upon our prairies they saw and recognized at first the sinuous, but level road, the tavern and wagon yard, the ford and ferry and the great corporations for forwarding persons and property in wagons. But within this generation that broke the soil were the time and the men who laid straight lines of iron, relegated the taverns, towns and even part of time itself, to the scrap heap, overturned customs and abolished things that had formed racial adventure since the Crusades, and

recreation since the Troubadours first circulated and the Gypsies first moved.

It has been one of my prime purposes to cause Iowa people of practical and poetic mind to delve down through the stratum of Iowa thrift after 1865, and on through that of Iowa valor of the Civil War era, into the rich deposits of foundation times. Thus, and as yet most of the effort has been to aid in recalling and visibly marking the travel ways found and respected by those who entered upon and first used the lands.

When our race has ventured into new regions of either land or sea, man's first act has been to fix in science the evidence of his act. He has charted his ship's course by reference to immovable stars and left his pathway a legible line. On land, by a variation of the same practice, he has actually laid down his meridians and parallels, adjusting his life and that of his fellows to the "boundaries" all respect, and to the "land marks" set or selected by the surveyor to inform the unpracticed. In Iowa, every farm and road and right of way is so marked upon the surface of the earth itself, and its counterpart is described by courses and distances and again by attendant maps drawn usually to scale. In the case of lands themselves, the original descriptions and maps, to which all men interested will for all time refer, are in the vaults of the State Land Office at Des Moines; copies, verified, are in the Federal Land Office at Washington, and in the offices of the county recorders in the respective county seats of Iowa.

These notes of the surveyor were made in the field as he went with chain and compass over the unbroken sod ahead of the pioneer. In his notes the surveyor recorded the existence of such imperishable objects as he found, which would forever bear witness by precise measurement and angle to the line he was laying down. And thus he drew his detail maps of the sections (one mile square), which he covered. Piecing together the adjacent sections he produced his larger maps, and as the boundary of one, of course, became the boundary of the next, the exact location, course, width, depth and character of each brook, creek, and river is actually laid down upon our official maps.

Occasional travelers, however, came over lands prior to either the "settler" or "surveyor." They were hunters, soldiers, trappers, traders, and Indians, individuals or groups. Starting from civilization, their objective was known and was often some remote game-ground, outpost or Indian camp. In nearly every instance there was direct and speedy movement. The passage of a few men and animals marked their course of travel or made a "trail" by the killing of the grass in the pathway and the action of the rain in deepening the tracks. Those desiring to go from the same point to the same remote region, being governed by identical purposes of easy levels and ready access to water and feed, followed the same course. These marks across country were by some designated as a "trace," by others a "trail." And as designations of streams differed, so did those of many of the ancient travel ways. The surveyors often mapped in the same townships and on adjacent sections one travel way as "trail" and "trace."

And, by the way, the nomenclature of the surveyor's descriptions were never standardized. If the surveyor happened to have been brought up in New England he used a set of terms differing often in some particulars from the terms used by the surveyor from South Carolina. So, for instance, the notes will indicate that White Breast Creek flowing across one township is noted as White Breast River; in the next township, but still lower down it is White Breast Creek. Smaller tributaries indicated as of identical importance from their width, depth, etc., will be denominated variously as "rill," "run," "rivulet," "branch," "swale," "slough," and "creek," though "swale" and "slough" occur but seldom in timbered regions.

The object in marking the Mormon Trail is to indicate by bronze and granite something of the importance in pre-railroad days in Iowa, of the travel upon one of these prehistoric ways. For a hundred years white men, and probably for thousands of years, aboriginal men and animals, passing east and west over what is now Iowa, followed easy levels and stream crossings. There is a natural way of easy passage of the Missouri at or near Council Bluffs. Advancing toward that passage from any point on the Mississippi, almost all paths converge in Cass County. But

in the main, early travel in historic times was from southeastern Iowa; the main stream of the trail lay there, and it was by accident that this way, being taken by large bodies of Mormons in 1846, the year in which parts of the lands across which the way lay were surveyed, became denominated in the surveyor's original notes and maps as the "Mormon Trail." As the surveyors advanced westward with their surveys they carried the designation, with variations, such as "Mormon Trace"; "Road from Pisgah to the Missouri"; "Mormon Road"; "Road from Southeast Iowa"; "Road from Nauvoo," etc.

The course above referred to, under whatever designation, was little used in all its length after 1848 by the Mormon emigration, which after Nauvoo was depopulated, crossed the Mississippi at and above Burlington, and, in the main passed through Iowa City, crossed the Des Moines River at various places, depending on season and soil conditions, but finally converging in the "Old Mormon Trail" before reaching Council Bluffs. Their caravans formed probably less than a tenth of the travel for the decade of 1846-1856, since the great California and Oregon emigration from Iowa and east took that road, while much of the enterprise and adventure, investment, business, settlement, emigration, legislation and litigation in Iowa along the "Mormon Trail" was based upon this general travel.

From the immense collection of Iowa newspapers of 1849 and later, preserved in the Historical Department of Iowa at Des Moines, I have copied thousands of the then current advertisements, news items, published letters and editorials that indicate the importance of wagon travel of that time. These indicate and name the different routes, the destination, objects and accomplishments of the travelers, and the interest and expectations of the people remaining at home in Iowa. I set out from but one paper, the *Western Democrat*, published by J. B. Dorr, at Andrew, Jackson County, Iowa, three typical items. One a ferry advertisement, one a general store advertisement and one paragraph of a letter from California to the *New York Tribune*.

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.