

NORTHERN IOWA ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO

By O. H. RALEIGH

In a few months Iowa will observe its one hundredth anniversary as a state. It safely may be asserted that at no other time in recorded history, and in no other part of the world, is there a precedent for such a transformation from a wilderness into a highly developed and progressive community on such a large scale in so short a period of time. To review the steps and incidents leading to its present state of advancement might be worth while.

The astronomical and geologic processes, lasting millions of years, by which Iowa was evolved, are beyond the scope of this article. However, I do wish to mention the four glacial inundations which visited Iowa, the first several hundred thousand years ago; and the last about twenty-five thousand years ago, a wide tongue-shaped area crossing the Iowa border from the north from Worth to Osceola counties and extending southward into Polk, Dallas and Guthrie counties, because they contributed much to the supremacy of the state. Without them Iowa might be indistinguishable from the other western states. Because of them Iowa became an agricultural paradise, one of the richest farming areas of like proportions on the face of the earth. It possesses about one-fourth of the grade A farm land in the whole of the United States. Among the states it is first in the production of corn, oats, live stock and a dozen other important commodities. It is also first in literacy, perhaps the most important "first" of them all.

The admission of Iowa as a state in the union of states was merely incidental to the beginning of a marvelous agricultural development. So also were the early explorations and discoveries. They prefaced the coming of the settlers and the conversion of the wilder-

ness into homes for millions. It is interesting, of course, to note that Father Marquette and Louis Joliet, under direction of French authorities at Quebec, sailed down the Mississippi river and landed on Iowa soil somewhere near the mouth of the Iowa river as early as 1673; and that later discoverers and explorers, Lewis & Clark, Zebulon M. Pike, Stephen Kearny, Albert M. Lea and others traversed this region and sailed the rivers of its borders. In the retrospect their descriptions of the country are not now without interest, and they must have been of more than passing interest to the people of those times. A touch of comedy was unconsciously introduced into the rather serious travel literature of that time by the publications of one Louis Armand, known also as Baron de Lahontan, who conjured up a grotesque region where Indian chiefs lived in luxury, carried by "six slaves." He submitted an elaborate chart of an imaginary river, the center of a vast system, which had no counterpart in reality and which later explorers and geographers summarily repudiated and rejected. Apparently he was a pioneer Dr. Cook, or another Baron Munchausen.

A review of the past one hundred years would hardly be complete without touching on the fate of the aborigines who for so many years roved here and sustained themselves upon the once abundant fruitage of the plains. Much has been said and written about the treatment they received at the hands of the white settlers and the U. S. government. In that time the right of conquest was more leniently regarded than now. Territory sparsely settled and utilized only in a limited sense was often regarded as virgin soil by explorers. The Indians themselves appeared to hold similar views, as they did not hesitate in dispossessing other tribes of their lands when they felt able to do so. The most enlightened nations of the world stand convicted of countless similar offenses. Whether uncivilized tribes are justified in holding back progress and development after their "hunting grounds" have ceased to yield sufficient sustenance, and thereby

preventing immeasurably greater production of food, may be an open question, even when priority of occupation favors the native.

When Iowa was admitted as a state the Indians had been deprived of title and possession of the land, with the exception of small areas along the northern and the northwestern borders of the state claimed by Sioux tribes. However, in 1851 by treaty they surrendered their claim to this territory, though they lingered in small numbers about the Iowa lakes region for some years thereafter, and in 1857 perpetrated the Spirit Lake massacre, and later during the Civil war committed similar offenses near New Ulm, Minnesota, and along the Iowa border. Thereafter for many years small bands visited streams and lakes in northern Iowa for game and camping sites. The undisputed control of the area by the whites prevented further outbreaks.

BEAUTY OF UNBROKEN PRAIRIE

Northern Iowa one hundred years ago was practically a wilderness. It was preeminently the prairie section of the state. From a scenic standpoint it was unique. There was no rugged terrain, with mountains and broad expanses of water, which is often considered indispensable to beautiful scenery. To fully appreciate the beauty of the prairie it is not to be considered statically, but as a panorama. The seasons play a vital role in the drama of nature as enacted upon the prairies. Those who have spent months and years upon the Iowa prairie never cease to cherish its recollection. They felt its moods, its pulsations; they basked in its long summer sunshine; viewed its white mantle of snow in winter; saw the green of spring gradually speckled with innumerable flowers, alternating throughout the summer, one specie after another, until the first frost threw a mantle of many hues over the woodlands along the rivers and lake shores. They thrilled under the tremendous power of the storms, often culminating in a tornado which tore

up big trees by the roots and scattered buildings in shreds over the ground.

One of the early explorers of Iowa, Albert M. Lea, wrote in 1836 that the Iowa country was "one grand rolling prairie along one side of which flows the mightiest river in the world." Every scene was "gay and beautiful, being clothed in grass, foliage and flowers." Summing it up he said: "All in all, for convenience of navigation, water, fuel and timber; for richness of soil; for beauty of appearance; and for pleasantness of climate, it surpasses any portion of the United States with which I am acquainted." Of the settlers of that period he says, after referring to their "neat hewed log cabins . . . with their fields stretching onto the prairies," "the character of this population is such as is rarely found in our newly acquired territories. With very few exceptions, there is not a more orderly, industrious, active, pains-taking population west of the Alleghenys . . . for intelligence . . . they are not surpassed by an equal number of citizens of any country in the world." This testimonial may well be extended for many years after the period mentioned.

The panoramic picture of that period would be incomplete without the animal life then prevailing. Buffalo, elk, deer, prairie wolves, foxes, and numerous smaller animals. The skies in fall and spring were alive with migratory birds; vast numbers of geese travelling in admirable formations from the Gulf of Mexico to the Canadian nesting grounds and back south again, and often alighting on Iowa terrain for feeding and resting; also ducks in great numbers, and cranes. In summer there were prairie chickens, as well as quail and other game birds.

To further perfect the picture it is necessary to mention the tornados and the blizzards which brought death to unwary settlers. Also that thrilling picture of terror and destruction, the prairie fire. Often in the fall or in the spring when dead vegetation was dry carelessly

handled fire would get beyond control and start across the prairie in a wind with the speed of a race horse, trapping animals and sometimes people, causing death. A prairie fire at night before a high wind was a never-to-be forgotten vision, often stretching from horizon to horizon.

Then also the passenger pigeon abounded. They constituted a natural phenomena, as when migrating sometimes flew in great formations almost a hundred miles long and a mile wide, though often in smaller flocks. They were easy victims of animals and hunters, and eventually when hunted for the eastern market were soon exterminated. For more than a quarter of a century now no known living specimen has existed. Upon the prairie at that time grew a rugged and succulent grass known as the blue stem. It was highly nutritious. The buffalo and elk grew fat on it and the early settlers found it an admirable feed for cattle and horses. However, it apparently could not be domesticated and it disappeared with the advent of the plow and modern cultivation.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE IOWA AREA

The political genealogy of Iowa may be summed up briefly as follows: Part of the vast region west of the Mississippi river first claimed by Spain by right of discovery by DeSoto. This claim later ignored by France, who claimed it on the basis of explorations. Ceded to Spain by France in secret treaty to prevent seizure by England during European wars. Spain recedes region to France. France again fearing loss of this territory sold it to the United States in a transaction known as the Louisiana Purchase, for \$12,000,000 and the assumption of \$3,000,000 of French obligations. President Jefferson had previously appointed Robert Livingston as minister to France, primarily to collect a damage claim, but later authorized him to negotiate for the purchase of the Island of New Orleans as an island shipping base.

Then James Monroe was hurriedly dispatched to Paris to assist but found that Livingston had already about completed negotiations for the purchase not only of the Island of New Orleans, but also for the whole of the territory later known as the Louisiana Purchase. Napoleon had wished to dispose of the whole area, considering it an incumbrance. Being pressed for funds he therefore almost surreptitiously included it in the deal under consideration. The enormity of the transaction almost staggered the United States officials, who feared they would have difficulty in persuading the home people and government to accept. After the purchase the area was first attached to the Indiana Territory, then to the Louisiana Territory, then to the Missouri Territory, from which it was separated by the Missouri Compromise, when Missouri was admitted as a state the portion then known as the Iowa district was left as a political orphan until 1834, when it was connected with the Michigan Territory, and in 1836 to the Wisconsin Territory and in 1838, after being thus shunted about for years it became the Iowa Territory, embracing all of the territory between the Mississippi and Missouri rivers and northward to the present Canadian border. In 1846 Iowa was admitted as a state with its present boundaries.

Thus we find Iowa one hundred years ago. At the time of admission it had forty-four counties, mostly in the southeastern corner of the state. Northern Iowa was then unorganized, except for a few counties along the Mississippi river as far north as Dubuque county. North of that point Fayette county had previously had control over the eastern half of North and South Dakota, most of Minnesota and about a fourth of Iowa. However, after Iowa became a state the county was shorn of most of its dominion. The first general assembly added eight more counties. And as soon as the whole state was opened for settlement fifty additional counties were established. By consolidations and changes the total number of counties was soon reduced to ninety-nine, the present number.

NORTHERN IOWA SPARSELY SETTLED

When Iowa was admitted as a state her population was slightly more than one hundred thousand, most of these people resided in the southeastern part of the state. Northern Iowa had then less than ten thousand people; these were in Clayton, Dubuque and Clinton counties. No doubt there were inhabitants in other sections of northern Iowa at that time, but the census enumerator evidently considered their number insufficient to warrant the effort of recording.

Pioneering in those days was a highly venturesome and dangerous undertaking. For northern Iowa Dubuque was the nearest trading point. The trek to that place when supplies were exhausted, without roads or public means of conveyance, involved daring, hardihood and a high degree of resourcefulness. Even when trading posts were established farther west, such as Waterloo, Mason City, Fort Dodge or Algona, "going to town" was no picnic.

Iowa was built upon the adventures and achievements of her pioneers. Their contribution has been of inestimable value. The great gulf between the difficulties and hardships of those times and those which confront the present residents of our state is underestimated at this time. A marvelous transformation has taken place since then. It did not come overnight. Years of struggle, waiting, disappointment and loneliness have intervened. Lack of equipment, markets and roads hampered the early settlers. Droughts, floods, epidemics, blizzards, tornadoes, grasshoppers and prairie fires punctuated their lives. But out of all this came Iowa as we now know it. The birth pangs of a great commonwealth were muffled in the wilderness, even as the travail of the mothers on the prairie were stifled in loneliness and isolation, without medical care and suitable attention. As a glimmering of Iowa's destiny began to dawn upon them the past faded into memories and they found recompense in the happier lot of their descendants.

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