

WHENCE CAME THE PIONEERS OF IOWA?

BY F. I. HERRIOTT.

Professor in Drake University.

The habits and manners of the primeval inhabitants of any country, generally give to it a distinctive character, which marks it throughout after ages. Notwithstanding the influx of strangers, bringing with them prejudices and prepossessions, at variance with those of the community in which they come; yet such is the influence of example, and such the faculty with which the mind imbibes the feelings and sentiments of those with whom it associates, that former habits are gradually lost and those which prevail in society, imperceptibly adopted by its new members.¹

The lineage of a people, like the genealogy of a family, is not commonly looked upon as a matter of general importance. The wayfaring man is wont to regard it as interesting and worth while only to antiquarians and scholastics. Some of our historians, strangely enough, think likewise. "What the pioneers were," declares a resident commentator upon our institutional history, "is vastly more important than where they came from or when or how they settled; for all law and government rests upon the character of the people." "The frontier called for men," the same writer further observes regarding our pioneers, . . . "who could break with the past, forget traditions and easily discard inherited political and social ideas." The argument is somewhat confusing and inconsistent but it is typical of a large body of opinion.

States or societies, no less than individuals, are the outgrowth of heredity and environment. Life, be it manifest in individual organisms or in social organisms, is a complex or resultant of those two variables. We certainly cannot understand the nature or significance of the customs and institutions of a people or a state unless we know the character of the environment of that people. But no less true is it that we can neither comprehend the character of a people or the peculiarities of their social development, nor measure the forces that determine public life and action in the present, unless we understand the sources of the streams of in-

¹ Alex. Scott Withers, *Chronicles of Border Warfare* (Thwaites ed.), p. 54.

fluence that united to make them what they are. A people cannot break with its past nor discard inherited political and social ideas, any more than a man can put away his youth and its influences. Social or political life may be greatly modified by the necessities of a new environment but heredity and ancestral traditions continue to exert a potent influence.

For years the declaration—"Emigrants from New England" settled Iowa—has been made by a popular standard book of reference, whose compilers have always maintained a fair reputation for accuracy in historical matters.¹ The assertion—enlarged often so as to include the descendants of New Englanders who earlier swarmed and pushed out into the valley of the Mohawk and into the petty lake region of New York, thence southwesterly around the Great Lakes down into Pennsylvania and thither into the lands out of which were carved the states of the old Northwest Territory—reflects probably the common belief or tradition of the generality.

Justice Samuel F. Miller, a Kentuckian by birth, was a practicing lawyer in Keokuk from 1850 to 1862, when he was appointed by President Lincoln a member of the Federal supreme court. In 1884, in a post-prandial speech before the Tri-State Old Settlers' Association, he said: "The people [of Iowa] were brought from New England, interspersed with the vigor of the people of Kentucky and Missouri."² In 1896 in an address at the Semi-Centennial of the founding of the State, the late Theodore S. Parvin, who came from Ohio in 1838 as private secretary to Robert Lucas, the first territorial governor of Iowa, and who was ever after an industrious chronicler of the doings of the first settlers, declared that the pioneers of Iowa "came from New England states, the younger generation directly, the older

¹ New York Tribune Almanac for 1889, p. 161, for 1905, p. 220.

² See Proceedings, p. 23. See Harper's Monthly, vol. LXXIX, p. 168 (July, 1889), where a somewhat different opinion is expressed.

having migrated at an earlier day, and located for a time in the middle states of that period and there remained long enough to become somewhat westernized. They were from New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. There was an element of chivalry, descendants of the old cavaliers of Virginia, some of whom had come through the bloody ground experience of Kentucky and Tennessee; these were found mostly in the southern portion of the territory".¹

Here and there we find contrary or divergent opinions. Occasionally we encounter assertions that original New Yorkers or natives of Pennsylvania or emigrants from southern states constituted the important elements in the tides of the western popular movement between 1830 and 1860 that flowed over into and through Iowa. But even when speakers and writers recognize that the immigration into Iowa was not entirely from the states of New England they almost always regard such other streams as of secondary importance or as subsequent to the inflow of the New Englanders or their westernized descendants. Issuing from this common belief we have the general opinion that the predominant influences determining the character of the social and political life and institutions of Iowa have been Puritan in their origin.

In what follows I shall examine briefly the grounds on which this tradition rests. I shall first consider the premises of the belief; second, the social conditions and political developments persistent throughout the history of Iowa that are inexplicable upon the New England hypothesis; and third, facts that clearly suggest if they do not compel a contrary conclusion respecting the region whence came our predominant pioneer stock.

The New Englander has always been in evidence in Iowa and his influence manifest. George Catlin on his journey down the Mississippi in 1835, found that "Jonathan

¹ See Parvin's *Who Made Iowa?* p. 13.

is already here from 'down East'." In 1834 the name of Iowa's capital city was changed from "Flint Hills" to Burlington, at the behest of John Gray, a son of Vermont.¹ Father Asa Turner, a son of Yale, while on a missionary expedition in 1836 found a settlement of New Englanders at Crow Creek in Scott county.² Stephen Whicher, himself from the Green Mountains, found "some families of high polish from the city of New York," in Bloomington (Muscatine), in October, 1838.³ In all missionary and educational endeavors in Iowa, New Englanders have from the first days played conspicuous parts and have been potent factors in the development of the State. Father Turner preached Congregationalism in "Rat Row", Keokuk, two years before Rev. Samuel Clarke exhorted the pioneers to embrace Methodism in the "Grove".⁴ In 1843 came the "Iowa Band", a little brotherhood of Andover missionaries and preachers, graduates of Amherst, Bowdoin, Dartmouth, Harvard, New York City University, Union College, the University of Vermont and Yale.⁵ It may be doubted if any other group of men has exerted a tithe of the beneficial influence upon the life of the State that was exerted by those earnest workers. The two oldest educational institutions in the State owe their inception and establishment to the far-sighted plans and persistent self-sacrifice and promotion of Asa Turner and the Iowa Band.⁶ It is not extravagant to presume that it was the emulation aroused by those apostles from New England that created the "passion for education" among the pioneers of Iowa, that resulted in the establishment of the fifty academies, colleges and universities between 1838 and 1852. From this fact doubtless

¹ Burlington Semi-Centennial, 1883, p. 20.

² ANNALS OF IOWA (3d ser.), vol. III, p. 56.

³ *Ib.* vol. IV, p. 509.

⁴ *Ib.* vol. III, p. 56.

⁵ *Ib.* vol. I, p. 523; also Magoun's *Asa Turner and His Times*, pp. 241-251, Ephraim Adams' *The Iowa Band* (2d ed.), pp. 12-73.

⁶ Denmark Academy, and Iowa College founded at Davenport in 1846, and in 1858 moved to Grinnell. L. F. Parker's *Higher Education in Iowa*, p. 137, and Adams *op. cit.* pp. 103-125.

Iowa came to be known as the "Massachusetts of the West."

The election of James W. Grimes governor of Iowa in 1854, and the revolution in the political control of the State which that event signified, first attracted the attention of the nation to Iowa. Prior to that date Iowa was regarded with but little interest by the people of the northern states. She was looked upon as a solid democratic state and was grouped with Illinois and Indiana in the alignment of political parties in the contest over the extension of slavery.

Suddenly the horizon changed. The Kansas-Nebraska bill produced a complete overturn. Grimes, a pronounced opponent of slavery, a son of New Hampshire, representing the ideas and traditions of the Puritans, was elected chief magistrate of Iowa and James Harlan was sent to the United States senate. At the conclusion of that critical contest Governor-elect Grimes wrote: "Our southern friends have regarded Iowa as their northern stronghold. I thank God it is conquered."¹ In the accomplishment of this political revolution New Englanders energized and lead largely by members of the Iowa Band, were conspicuous, if not the preponderant factors.² The immigration of population from New England was then approaching flood tide. "Day by day the endless procession moves on," declared *The Dubuque Reporter*. ". . . They come by hundreds and thousands from the hills and valleys of New England, bringing with them that same untiring energy and perseverance that made their native states the admiration of the world."³ The prompt, firm stand of those pioneers when shocked into consciousness by the aggressions of the southern leaders, the brilliant leadership of Grimes and Harlan for years thereafter and the long continued supremacy of the political party they first led to victory, probably afford us no small part of the explanation of the theory of the supremacy of New England in the settlement of Iowa.

¹ Cited by Von Holst from Pike's *First Blows of the Civil War*, p. 260.

² See Julius H. Powers' *Historical Reminiscences of Chickasaw County*, p. 153. Magoun's *Asa Turner*, pp. 278-282.

³ Quoted in N. Howe Parker's *Iowa as It Is in 1855*, pp. 55-56.

Not the least important premise of this view, it may be suspected, is the observation so frequently made by students of western history in the past three decades that "migration from the Atlantic states to the interior and western states has always followed along the parallels of latitude. Illinois is a remarkable illustration of this tendency. . . . Southern Illinois received its population from Virginia and other southern states, while northern Illinois was chiefly settled from Massachusetts and other New England states."¹ Historians Fiske and Schouler make similar observations about the lines of western popular movements.² Now if we extend eastward the line of the northern boundary of Iowa it will pass through or above Glen Falls near the lower end of Lake George, New York, through White Hall, Vermont, Lacona, New Hampshire, striking the coast near Portland, Maine. Extending a similar line eastward from the southern boundary (disregarding the southeastern deflection made by the Des Moines river) we should pass just north of Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, and come to the coast not far from Sandy Hook. If the general conclusion respecting western migration is universally and precisely true, Iowa, it will be observed, would naturally have been settled by New Englanders or their westernized descendants in New York, Michigan, and Wisconsin, and by those in Indiana, Ohio, and Illinois. We have been told recently by Mr. George Moore, that under the "Ordinance of 1787, New England men and ideas became the dominating forces from the Ohio to Lake Erie" in the settlement of the old Northwest Territory.³ A necessary consequence of this fact, if true as alleged, would be that the large emigration to Iowa from Ohio, Indiana and Illinois prior to 1860 was predominantly New England stock, or subject to Puritan ideas and institutions.

¹ Shaw's *Local Government in Illinois*, in *Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science*, vol. I, no. 3, pp. 5-6.

² Fiske's *Civil Government in the United States*, p. 81, and Schouler's *History of the United States*, vol. II, p. 243.

³ Moore's *The Northwest Under Three Flags*, p. XX.

The theory that Iowa's pioneers were of Puritan origin, while resting on these strong premises, and others that may be mentioned, breaks down when viewed in the light of common and notorious developments in the political and social life and institutions of the pioneers, many of which are manifest and potent in the life of the State to-day. New Englanders were conspicuous, energetic and vocal prior to 1840; they were disputatious and vigorous promoters of their ideals of government, law and morals and religion prior to 1860; but neither they nor their kith and kin from New York and Ohio were supreme in Iowa in those days. If they were supreme in numbers, how are we to account for the absence of so much that is distinctively characteristic of the customs and institutions of New England in the life of this first free state of the Louisiana Purchase?

In the local government of Michigan and Wisconsin the impress of New England's democratic ideals, her forms and methods of procedure, are to be observed in striking fashion.¹ In Minnesota and the Dakotas the same is largely true.² In Illinois the "intense vitality" of the town meeting system of government so possessed the minds of immigrants from New England that it overcame the prevalent county form of government, and now controls nearly four-fifths of the area of Illinois, although it was not given the right of way until 1848.³ Here in Iowa, it is not untrue to say, that the town meeting and all that it stands for in New England has been conspicuous chiefly by its absence. Governor Robert Lucas urged the adoption of the township as the unit for school purposes. An annual mass meeting was adopted in the scheme therefor. But neither became a vigorous institutional growth.⁴ Prof. Jesse Macy has shown us that there

¹ Bemis' Local Government in Michigan and the Northwest, Johns Hopkins University Studies, vol. I, no. V, p. 11, et seq. See also Fiske's Civil Government, p. 89, et seq.

² Fiske, *Ib.*, p. 91.

³ See Shaw *op. cit.*

⁴ Henry Sabin, Iowa's distinguished Superintendent of Public Instruction, a New Englander by birth and education, has the following pertinent observations in his last biennial report (1897).

"It is worthy of note that the first of these governors [Robert Lucas] in his message urged the adoption of the township as a basis of school organization. It never

is strong warrant for doubting the vitality of many of the laws first adopted for the regulation of local affairs in the territory.¹ Not a few of those statutes were enacted *pro forma*, not especially in response to insistent local demand. Conditions did not compel compact town or communal life. The pioneers depended upon township trustees and school directors. They relied upon county commissioners. Finally it is almost impossible to conceive of New Englanders deliberately or even unwittingly adopting the autocratic county judge system of government that prevailed in Iowa from 1851 to 1860. It struck full in the face every tradition of democracy cherished by the people of New England.²

If New Englanders settled Iowa, why did the people of the east experience a shock of surprise when the report reached them that the Whigs in 1846 had captured the first general assembly under the new State government.³ "What gain had freedom from the admission of Iowa into the Union," exclaimed Horace Greeley, in the New York Tribune of March 29, 1854. "Are Alabama and Mississippi more devoted to the despotic ideas of American pan-slavism . . . ?" Was not his opinion justified when one of our senators could boldly declare in congress that "Iowa is the only free State which never for a moment gave way to the Wilmot Proviso. My colleague voted for every one of the compromise measures, including the fugitive slave law, the late Senator Sturgeon, of Pennsylvania, and ourselves, being the only three senators from the entire non-slaveholding section of this Union who voted for it."⁵ Von Holst ranked

can be sufficiently regretted that we ever departed from his recommendation," p. 20. "There is no question that the commission [viz. of 1856] favored the township system. . . . Governor after governor, the state superintendents in unbroken line, prominent educational men, have remonstrated in vain, and in vain have attempted to secure a simpler organization. It will remain rooted in the prejudices until better ideas of school economy render it odious," p. 22.

¹ Macy's Institutional Beginnings in a Western State, J. H. U. Studies, vol. II, pp. 22-23. ANNALS OF IOWA (3d series), vol. V, p. 337.

² See Powers op. cit., pp. 73-76, 99-102.

³ Niles Register, Nov. 14, 1846, p. 176, and Nov. 21, p. 178.

⁴ Quoted in Rhodes' History of the United States, vol. I, p. 494.

⁵ Salter's Life of Grimes, p. 114. Congressman John Wentworth, of Chicago, in 1853 (?) introduced Grimes to President Pierce who knew the Whig relatives of Grimes in New Hampshire. Wentworth conceived it to be a "great joke" to intro-

Iowa as "a veritable hot bed of dough faces."¹ These current assumptions and conditions do not suggest that the State was originally or predominantly settled by emigrants from the bleak shores and granite hills of New England where love of liberty was ingrained.

The people of New England from the beginning of their history were alert and progressive in the furtherance of schools, both common and collegiate. Among our pioneers there was, as we have seen, great activity in the promotion of "Higher" institutions of learning, but the movement was largely the result of missionary zeal and work. It was not corporate and communal as was the case in New England. In 1843 Governor John Chambers expressed to the territorial legislature his mortification on realizing "how little interest the important subject of education excited among us."² Notwithstanding the great legal educational reforms secured by the legislature of 1856 and 1858, the backward condition of Iowa's rural schools in contrast with those in states west, north and east of us, has been a matter of constant complaint and wonderment.³

If one thing more than another characterizes the New Englander it is his respect for law and his resort to the pro-

duce him "as the next Governor of Iowa, as he was. Pierce thought he would have to change his politics first." Memorandum of Wentworth quoted in Salter's Grimes, p. 7.

¹ Von Holst, Constitutional History, vol. V, p. 278.

² The following from Dr. Salter's Life of Grimes strikingly illustrates the contention above: "He [Grimes] presided at an educational convention held in Burlington, June 7, 1847, in which the duty of the State to provide for the education of all children by equitable taxation was earnestly advocated and the profound regret expressed that the first general assembly of Iowa had made no provision for building school houses by law, but had left the whole matter to voluntary subscription." p. 26.

³ In his report in 1887 State Superintendent J. W. Akers, in some perplexity, pointed out the striking similarity of the conditions of education in Iowa to those prevalent in the southern states. pp. 57-58. Dr. W. T. Harris, National Commissioner of Education, showed that while Iowa spent large sums for schools, the schedules of salaries for teachers were the lowest of all the north central states (Report, 1895-96, p. LXVIII). In his presidential address before the State Teachers' Association in 1892, President Charles E. Shelton of Simpson College said apropos of the rural schools:

"Something must be done for our country schools. I want to say to you tonight my friends, that I believe that three-fourths of the teaching in the rural schools of Iowa is absolutely worthless, and that an equal proportion of the money spent is absolutely thrown away. I do not say this upon simple speculation and conjecture, but it is the experience of every man and woman here. . . ." (Proceedings, p. 17.)

The Association by formal vote commended the "entire address of President Shelton for its common sense treatment in every particular and its clear statement of the various important phases of the real education of the boys and girls who go to make up the citizenship of our State and nation." P. 12.

cesses of the law for the suppression of disorder and violence. Coupled with, if not underlying this marked trait, are his sobriety, his love of peaceful pleasures and his reserve in social life. In the early history of Iowa we find much of boisterous carousal in country and town. In 1835, Lieut. Albert Lea was refused shelter late on a cold night, at the only house near the mouth of the Iowa river which was "occupied by a drinking crowd of men and women."¹ A correspondent in *The New York Journal*, writing from Dubuque in 1839, declared that "the principal amusement of the people seems to be playing cards, Sundays and all;" while another observer speaks of the "wide and unenviable notoriety" of Dubuque.² One may come upon sundry such accounts of pioneer life in various cities along the river and inland. Along with this sort of hilarity and reckless pleasures alien to Puritan character we find gross disregard of law and order frequent in election contests,³ flagrant corruption and considerable popular practice in Judge Lynch's court. Brutal murders, cattle and horse stealing, and counterfeiting appear frequently in the calendars in the early days. Outbursts of mob fury and hanging bees, the institution of societies of Regulators and Vigilantes form considerable chapters in the careers of many counties in the State.⁴ This

¹ Iowa Historical Record, vol. VI, p. 551.

² ANNALS OF IOWA, vol. I, p. 316.

³ ANNALS OF IOWA, 1st ser., vol. I, pp. 27-28, 297.

⁴ The following ringing letter of Grimes to the sheriff of Clinton county, written in the last year of his term as Governor, affords both instructive reading and interesting evidence of the character and extent of lawlessness in eastern Iowa in the fifties:

EXECUTIVE OFFICE, IOWA, BURLINGTON, July 8, 1857.

Your letter of the 29th. June, in which you state that you have warrants in your hands for the arrest of persons who seized and hanged Bennet Warren in your county on the 25th inst.; that you are "informed that a very large combination has been formed, banded together by agreement or oath to execute similar outrages upon other persons, and protect and defend any of their members who may be attempted to be dealt with according to law," and that this combination is supposed to number "about two thousand persons in Jackson and the adjoining counties," has been duly received.

You ask me "what course shall be pursued?" I answer unhesitatingly, serve the warrants in your hands and enforce the laws of the State. You have authority to summon to your aid the entire force of your county. If you deem it to be necessary to do so, call for that force, and prosecute every man who refuses to obey your summons.

If the power of your county is not sufficient to execute the laws, a sufficient force from other counties shall be placed at your disposal.

I am resolved that, so far as in me lies, this lawless violence, which, under the plea of administering justice to horse thieves, sets at defiance the authorities of the State, and destroys all respect for the laws, both human and divine, shall be checked.

lawlessness can hardly be made to square with the traditions that New Englanders brought with them to Iowa, traditions that universally govern their conduct as citizens wherever we find them.

Finally we may note a complex or miscellany of facts that have always given more or less color to the history of the State, the significance of which is not commonly discerned. These facts consist of sundry intangible psychic or "spiritual" traits of the pioneers and of their descendants, characteristics often vague and varying and difficult to visualize, but which close observers may clearly perceive.

Iowa, by reason of the marked fertility of her soil and favorable climate, has become the garden spot of the continent. Her citizens have attained distinguished success in the accumulation of wealth. The high level of general contentment and prosperity of the citizen body has long been a matter of comment and admiration among peoples in neighboring states. The high degree of popular intelligence and education, and the prevalence of high standards of private and civic righteousness are no less marked. All these things admirable and more are incontestible. They no doubt suggest the preponderance of Puritan or northern influences in the life of Iowans. Nevertheless one does not long study the history of Iowa, or converse with those familiar with the early days of the State, or scrutinize our life in recent years, before he becomes dimly conscious of something in the character of large portions of the population that clearly distinguishes them from the New England type of citizen. About the time the writer became interested in the make-up of Iowa's pioneer population he asked an early lawmaker of the State if, in his opinion, Iowa was first peopled by emigrants from New England, and his reply was:

I shall have no hesitation, therefor, when officially advised of the exigency, to call out the entire military power of the State, if necessary, to crush out this spirit of rebellion, which has shown itself in your county.

I shall direct all the military companies in the State to hold themselves in readiness for duty.—Salter's Grimes, pp. 93-94.

See G. W. Ellis' "In By-Gone Days," in which is described at great length the numerous mobs and lynchings in Jackson county, reprinted from the "Record" of Maquoketa, Iowa. See, also, Porter's History of Polk County, pp. 505-507, 525-529, 531-543.

That is a common opinion but I have long doubted the truth of the assertion. Iowa has been very slow in making progress in education, in the promotion of libraries, in the improvement of our city governments, in the beautifying of our cities and towns, and in the public provision of facilities for art and culture. In New England, cities promote general culture as a matter of course. In 1856 Governor Grimes, himself a New Englander, urged public provision for libraries in country and town. But nothing came of it. Our people did not become aroused to the importance of libraries until late in the nineties, and then you know it was probably the munificence of the Ironmaster of Pittsburg, and the conditions of his gifts that stirred our people into active promotion of libraries.

Take the long struggle of the friends of the State University before they got that institution of learning on a firm foundation. It was not until after 1880 that the vigorous opposition to its enlargement and expansion ceased. From the fifties right on to the eighties the advocates of university education found it hard to overcome, not only active opposition, but the inertia and indifference of legislators and public towards public expenditures for education. This same characteristic was observable in many other directions. We have made marked progress in Iowa to be sure. But it has been hard sledding, I can tell you. I don't understand the reasons for such an attitude of constant hostility and bushwhacking opposition to forward movements that prevailed so generally in Iowa before 1880. It was hardly in harmony with the known liberalism of New Englanders.

This attitude towards "forward" movements in Iowa, this "unprogressiveness" many would not regard in such an adverse fashion. In their estimation it represents not indifference to the finer arts and culture of civilization but rather a strenuous individualism, a sturdy independence and self-dependence instead of an inclination to resort constantly to the agencies of government. New Englanders from the very beginning of their colonial history have been much given to socialism. They turn naturally to the state and communal authorities to secure civic or social improvements and popular culture. The people of Iowa, on the contrary, have certainly been normally inclined to improve things chiefly via the individualistic route. They have been, and now are, instinctively opposed to the enlargement of governmental power that entails increased taxation and greater interference with what the people are prone to regard as the peculiar domain of personal freedom and selection.

All of a piece with the traits just referred to is the "placidity" of so much of our life. One often hears the comment that there is little that is interesting or picturesque either in our history or in the character of the population. We are pronounced "prosaic." There is much that is old-fashioned, out of date; but it is not quaint or romantic. Travellers have noted that while there is much of commendable success and wealth throughout the commonwealth there is a monotony in the local life, a lack of ambition, and instead contentment with things as they are. Land and lots, corn and cattle, "hog and hominy," these things, we are told constitute our *summum bonum*.¹ The hasty and promiscuous observations of travellers, who sojourn briefly among us, are not always to be accepted without salt. Yet the fact is obvious that there is in the Iowan's character and in his life a noticeable trait that we may designate Languor, a certain inclination to take things easy, not to worry or to fuss even if things do not satisfy. We may observe it in commercial and mercantile pursuits, in city and town governments, in rural and urban life. This is clearly not a characteristic of the New Englander. The Yankee, whether found in Maine, or Connecticut, or New York, is alert, aggressive, eager in the furtherance of any business or culture in which he is interested. In all matters of public concern, especially if they comprehend considerations involving right and wrong, the New Englander is ardent, disputatious, relentless. He agitates, educates and preaches reformation. But this is not the characteristic disposition of the Iowan.

[To be concluded.]

¹ See Rollin Lynde Hartt on The Iowans, in the Atlantic Monthly, vol. 86, pp. 186, *et seq.*

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