

[SKETCHES OF THE EARLY SETTLEMENT OF THE WEST BY
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To treat of this first subject, the early settlement of the west, would require a volume, containing incidents of deep interest, minute detail, and great historical research. But in this sketch it is proposed to relate only such scenes of frontier life as have come under my own observation and have been dimly retained in memory.

More than forty years ago an emigrant family placed their little effects in a flat-boat or broad-horn, as this kind of craft has sometimes been called, and availing themselves of a rise in the waters of French Creek, a small stream in the northwest corner of Pennsylvania, floated gently down the current.

Passing Meadsville they soon enter the Alleghany, and arriving at Pittsburg after a short delay they again dip their long boat oars in the placid waters of the famed Ohio. They glided down this beautiful stream amidst verdant banks lined with flourishing villages and newly opened farms, between islands which rise from the bosom of the stream and mid scenes of natural magnificence where were enacted not many years before some of the most tragical incidents of the Indian wars.

It was in the early spring. The year bloomed fresh amidst the unsparing view of verdant banks and island groves which were mirrored in the bright waters as the voyagers pursued their winding way in a life journey to found new homes in the luxuriant far West.

²¹ This sketch must have been written about 1860. The manuscript is in the possession of Mrs. Ada L. Collier of Dubuque, Iowa.

They had heard of the beauty and fertility of this region long before it lured them away from their old granite hills in the East. Now they beheld in all their pristine freshness and beauty the actual reality.

Travelers returning from this land of wonders had recounted the glories of the prairie land in strains of glowing eloquence as the Egypt of America and the flower of the world. The old song of hunt the buffalo and settle on the banks of the pleasant Ohio had been sung in their ears with all its bewitching melody, while wildest romance lent its enchantment to the distant scene. Now is unfolded to their view the actual landscape smiling with verdure and redolent with hopes.

Gliding down the gentle stream the travelers pause awhile at that island home of Blennerhassett then lying in ruin and decay which once was the home of elegant hospitality perchance of dark intrigue. Here Burr and his confederates first uttered their disunion sentiments and the place looked indeed as if it were cursed with a curse.

They glide along by Cincinnati, the Queen City, by Louisville, and other rising cities, till finally they moor their rude craft by the shore of the stream at Shawnee Town, about one hundred miles above its junction with the Mississippi. Here they change their effects into wagons and commence a journey by land into the interior of Illinois.

From Shawnee Town to Edwardsville the distance is about one hundred and thirty miles. This journey accomplished, the travelers rest from the fatigues of the way in the hospitable log cabin of the squatter sovereign. Edwardsville, as all know, at that time was a small inland town, the seat of justice of Madison County, lying north-eastwardly of St. Louis about twenty-five miles.

The spring time brought on the ox teams and horses to

the plough turning over the rich green sward of the prairie to be planted with Indian corn and other edibles. The crops grew with great luxuriance and the harvest proved abundant. At this time no wheat was sown and for many years after it existed as an article of food only in the memory of eastern emigrants those from southern States generally preferring corn dodgers. Indeed, a wheat cake would have been to some a rarity more choice than the richest pastry of the present day.

The population was mostly from Tennessee, Kentucky, or North Carolina, with a few adventurers from down east mingled among them. Corn dodgers, Indian corn, bread, hominy or hulled corn, with wild venison, turkeys, hogs, coons, opossums, squirrels, prairie chickens, etc., composed the living. Mills for the manufacture of grain into flour were not to be found. It is true that after a while when settlements thickened some horse-mills were erected in different parts of the country. They consisted merely of an enclosure of logs with a great wheel in the center, around which a large leather rope called a whang was placed which was also attached to a smaller wheel, the gudgeon of which turned the mill stones and ground the corn, the motive power being horses. Customers took their own teams and wagons with shelled corn and went often to the horse mill ten, twenty, and even thirty miles distant — waiting sometimes one, two, or three days for their turn to grind, living in the mean time on parched corn and sleeping out in their wagons or around a heap of burning logs. At this time there was no such thing as a money currency. The exchanges of the country were made chiefly by produce and all business conducted by barter, changing one thing for another. Corn, coon skins, and bees-wax were the mediums of domestic exchange. The standard price of corn (six and

a quarter cents) seemed to govern. A gingham handkerchief costing now about ten cents would then sell at twenty-five cents, four bushels of corn or two barrels[?] in the ear. A yard of domestic worth at present ten cents, four bushels, while the article at present prices would purchase four handkerchiefs or four yards of this cloth of best quality. A cow was worth six dollars or ninety-six bushels; a horse, twenty-five dollars or three hundred and sixty-two bushels; a hog, two hundred pounds in weight, three dollars or fifty bushels, and so with other articles of produce. A coon skin, the best measure of value, stood at twenty-five cents; and when a man walked into a store with a few rolled up under his arm it was not uncommon to hear him ask the price of goods and say in a confident manner "I want them cheap; you see I've got the coonskins" and this saying has passed into a proverb — a man of ready pay.

During all this time there was no money of any description. Talk of scarcity now a days! Then the only change aside from barter consisted of bits and picayunes — the former a piece of the eighth part of a Spanish milled dollar, cut with a chisel into eight equal parts when the operation was fairly and honestly done, but the skillful and designing often made nine bits and even ten out of one dollar piece. The picayune in like manner was a Spanish quarter cut into four equal parts, hence the origin of these two terms bits and picayunes.

Some curious facts may be here presented regarding these early settlers. They raised their own tobacco, indigo, and cotton which had supplied their main clothing. Generally a piece of ground, three or four acres of cotton, was planted somewhere in the corn field. It is a hardy plant and when cultivated well matures in that climate and grows in great perfection. The seeds are plenteous, the plant it-

self strong and vigorous. It will grow well in most of the western states, and like the hemp and flax produce better growth and finer fiber than it will on poorer lands even under sunnier skies.

In the fall it assumed a ripened form branching out like little trees and when the season for opening the bolls came a field would look like brushwood covered with the early snows. Then each family engaged in picking out the cotton from the earlier bolls; while yet the later ones, those growing lower on the branches, were not matured. At evening the seeds were taken out by hand and after a time it was ready for the card and the spinning wheel. Then one more adroit and skilled than the others made up the web on the rude loom which stood at that day as an indispensable machine in every well regulated family.

The women carded, spun, wove, and made up the garments. Some may exclaim: "What! raise cotton in Illinois and Iowa! and that for home use!" Yes, the soil and climate are well adapted to its growth. It only requires the labour. It will yield now as well as forty years ago! The sun moves in the same sphere which he warmed at that period. Only this — men's necessities do not compel them to raise cotton now, and free labor is turned to better account than a doubtful competition with the slave labour of the south. Also communications have been opened up between the eastern marts of commerce and the then isolated prairies of the West. At the time of which we are speaking there was no medium of transfer except by the slow and expensive conveyance of keel-boats, flat-boats, and wagons.

The merchant received the produce of the country for his goods. If taken in hogs and corn they were combined and the products, pork and bacon, sent off as a remittance for his stock. The new settlers generally raised their own

tobacco and cotton, spun and wove their own cloth, tanned the leather, made the shoes, in short relied upon their own industry for most of the comforts of life. There were no Sabbaths or holy days, no schools or churches, no roads or canals, and no speedy communication with other parts of the world. It was the transition period from the savage to the civilized state, and years and years were wasted in vain endeavor to bring the western prairies in successful cultivation. Add to this the fact that the inhabitants were of that class whose wants were few. Corn dodgers, hoe cake with a little hog and hominy filled the measure of their desires. Their dress was a blue hunting shirt with fringes around the bottom, with buck skin belt around the middle, cotton trousers, coarse brogan shoes or moccasins, a rifle on their shoulders, a huge wolf skin cap on their head, a coon-skin bullet pouch, a powder horn, and a knife stuck in the belt. The women dressed in home made cloth, cut close and trim, fitting their forms with exceeding exactness, a calico bonnet of gingham, ample in its dimensions, with leather shoes made low disclosing the ankle. But in summer and within doors they went barefoot for economy sake. No crinoline deformed their natural symmetry.

They were not called suckers, that term being applied to them after one of those great stampedes to the Galena lead mines which took place in later times about 1827 — similar to that rush for California in 1846[9]. It is well known that the species of fish called a sucker runs far up the streams in spring time and down again in the fall. So these Illinoisians got the name by following the example of the fish. Goods had to be transported from Baltimore by wagons over the mountains to Pittsburgh or Wheeling and thence by keel-boats or flat-boats by the Ohio River or its tributaries and up the Mississippi to supply the new settlements. Conse-

quently prices were high as compared with present rates. In like manner remittances were made with the surplus produce of the country.

As settlements thickened and civilization advanced, election day was indispensable. Not unfrequently differing parties met and fought just to show their manhood, gouging out each other's eyes, peeling off noses, pulling out hair, pounding and tramping one another in the most approved style of the day. We have seen a row begin by two neighboring districts. One man says to another: "Oh you come from Sandy Creek." "Yes." "Well I live on the high prairie and can lick any man that lives on Sandy Creek." Off go the blue hunting shirts, whack resound the blows, down tumble the combatants. They bite, gouge, throttle, and thump until one or the other cries out "enough, take him off." One party attempt to separate them according to the rules of honor; the other party strive to prevent it, and the whole field becomes one theater of individual combat. The victors meantime will jump upon their feet, swing their arms, beat their fists, and swear they are the best men and can whip their weight in wild cats. One more valorous than the rest will crow like a cock, roar like a bull, or whoop like a savage. He dares any Yankee to show his face. We recollect an old song frequently sung by these Tennessee Boys which will show the literary tastes and feelings of the Alligator horses.

A Yankee was looked upon with great aversion as a spy, a sharper, one who would not fight, but kept his skill for buying up the dollar. If he attended the public gatherings no one must suspect him of coming from farther east than the mountain ranges of the Blue Ridge and Alleghanies. If so, then he must fight some one or leave the ground.

But with all these scenes of border life there were ming-

led some gleams of warmest sunshine. The Kentuckian, Tennessean, and Carolinian came to respect more and more their Yankee neighbor. They found him not so bad at least as they had expected. They had borrowed his horses to go to mill, his oxen to add to their prairie team, his loom and spinning wheel for the making of the home cloth, and in pinching times a few bushels of corn for home use, and some that was sure to grow to plant in the spring. Thus the prejudices of those people against eastern men were gradually dispelled and the West presents today an example of how much of sectional prejudice can be done away by bringing man into close proximity with his fellow man. Cowper very justly says: "Lands intersected by a narrow frith abhor each other, mountains interposed make enemies of nations that had else like kindred drops been mingled into one."

The emigrant family which started forty years ago in the flat-boat to found new homes in the West are not through with their wanderings. They hear the wild murmurings of the lead mines away to the north and such scenes as have been repeated in the great stampede to California and Pike's Peak prevail. Accounts come sweeping down by each traveler of great lead mines just opened up at Galena. Farms are sold, their stock and other availables sold off at random. The old pioneers are on the wing again. Gold! Gold! Gold! Oh thou mysterious Spirit, the root of all evil, but the top branches of all progress!

Young men and maidens, old folks and all, start for the lead mines; and a journey then to the land of promise was like a journey in later times to Oregon or California. How they strive and suffer, how they get gold and lose it, how they pass through the perils and hardships and dangers of border life and how they have since been bound to the bal-

ance of the world by the iron hinges of commerce will not now be detailed. Suffice it to say, that lonely settlement far west is the far West no longer. Emigration has flowed onward, ever onward, until the shore of the great western ocean arrests its course even though reflux waves beat back again to the plains of the Mississippi.

In process of time, however, channels of communication were opened up. The steamer began to ply on all the western rivers. Some experiment trips were made from Pittsburg to New Orleans. We recollect two little short square steamers on the Ohio which seemed at that day to be monsters from the great deep as they urged their way at four miles speed up and down the river.

Now they cover our waters on lake and on stream; while the steam car darts along over our prairies in every direction as a herd of fiery dragons — only they are messengers of peace and joy. Nothing exceeds them in their flying course but the lightnings of heaven borne onward upon the telegraphic wires to serve the uses and purposes of man.

What though the golden crop grows scarce and mining has fled our prairie land. What though a cloud of gloom descended a year ago and desolated many hopes and fond anticipations. Still the valley lands have felt no panic or pressure.

Prolific earth still yields her yellow grain and full and plenteous harvests crown the years. Our banks of ore discount as liberally as before the pressure began.

With the steam boat, railroad and telegraph in full operation over the commercial fields of the West, with improved modes of agriculture and mining, and a return to the legitimate pursuits of home industry we may not envy sunnier skies or golden lands so bright in the dreams of the last few years.

Occupying a central position in the great valley of the West where nature has furnished more of the riches of her abundant stores than in any other quarter of the globe, with a climate unsurpassed and a population untrammelled and strong, we may well indulge in high anticipations of the future and in the language of another viewing the political aspect of the times may our last lingering gaze rest on a glorious Union.