

Across the Prairies of Iowa

In the fall of 1834, following a dragoon expedition across the plains of the Southwest, Lieutenant-Colonel Stephen Watts Kearny was ordered to march from Fort Gibson, Arkansas, and establish winter quarters near the site of Louis Honoré Tesson's apple orchard at the head of the Des Moines Rapids. Upon his arrival Kearny was chagrined to find no shelter for his tired horses and troops. "The quarters for the officers and soldiers are not as far advanced as I had expected," he wrote with characteristic bluntness, "and not a log is laid for stables for our horses. We shall on the 28th go to work with all our disposable forces, and I hope by the close of next month we may complete the buildings, tho' they will be less comfortable and of meaner appearance, than those occupied by any other portion of the Army."

A bitter cold winter caused Kearny to complain frequently about the "uncomfortable quarters and the inadequate supplies." But spring finally came and with it orders for a summer campaign. Kearny was instructed to proceed up the Des Moines River to the Raccoon Fork with Companies B, H, and I, for the purpose of examining that vicinity as a suitable place for a military post. From there he

was to march to Wabasha's village on the Mississippi and thence westward to the headwaters of the Des Moines, returning to his post along the right bank of that stream. It was expected that the expedition would prove disciplinary and instructive to the soldiers weary of barracks life, as well as productive of valuable information about the interior of Iowa.

The detachment of dragoons began the eleven-hundred-mile march on June 7, 1835. Six or seven Indians joined them at "Keokuk's town," near the site of Agency, Iowa, and Frank Labashure, a half-breed, was secured as interpreter. Heavy rains impeded their progress as the horses sank deep in the mud or floundered through boggy sloughs. "Marched 16 miles over a marshy Prairie," was the entry for June 15th in the journal kept by an unknown trooper. "Encamped on a dry piece of land but at night had a hard storm of rain and wind accompanied with much thunder and lightning. We left Opponuse or Iway town [the present site of South Ottumwa] 6 miles to our left. Col. Kearny is very mild and the command in good health and spirits. So much rain renders marching unpleasant we have to encamp each night in mud & water but still I am better contented than when in quarters."

Another member of the expedition described the early summer weather as a "succession of rains, blows, and chills: and if the sun happen to shine,

it does so gloomily, as if boding a coming storm. The whole country becomes saturated with water; the low lands are overflowed; the streams are swollen; and locomotion is rendered difficult except by water."

Colonel Kearny had been leading his men along the watershed which divides the Des Moines and Skunk rivers. By the time they had reached the present site of Oskaloosa the weather had changed and the dragoons found themselves traversing prairies "covered with strawberries" in such abundance "as to make the whole track red for miles." Marching at the rate of about fifteen miles a day, the ripening of the strawberries coincided with their progress and gave them "this luxury for many weeks, increased by the incident of one of our beeves becoming a milker."

Wild game was seen in abundance. Turkeys, grouse, ducks, and prairie chickens rose in alarm and took precipitate flight before this unwelcome invasion of the dragoons. In every stream pike, pickerel, catfish, trout and many other varieties of fish were found. Deer was plentiful, while a bear or buffalo sometimes came within range.

Having failed to strike the Raccoon Fork of the Des Moines, Colonel Kearny turned his course northeastward on June 22nd toward Wabasha's village. Their supply of pork had given out and the dragoons were dependent upon the "chase & Beef" of which there proved to be a great plenty.

"Not far from the head of Skunk (Chicaqua) river, in the midst of an ocean of fine native grass, such as only Iowa produces," wrote Lieutenant Albert M. Lea, "we encountered a small herd of buffalo, to which many of us gave chase." It was the first time Lea had seen "the lordly beast in his home." Most of the day was spent in the chase and that night bison meat was plentiful in camp. After Lea's tent was pitched four rattle snakes were killed within it. The next day he had a bath in a pool, occupied by mosquitoes so large that he pressed one in his journal, and kept it for years as "a specimen of the luxuriant growth of the plains."

Three hours were spent in crossing the "Iway" River. Continuing their march over the rolling prairie, they passed a "soux Fort" consisting of twenty or thirty holes large enough to contain five or six men and dug in a circular form upon a small eminence with nothing for a barricade except the dirt dug from the holes. A few days later the dragoons killed several more buffalo.

Weary and sore from hard riding, the dragoons crossed the present northern boundary of Iowa north of the site of Osage. Every hilltop presented an ever changing panorama of "high hills & deep Vallies with here and there a fine cascade caused by the water of the Prairie tumbling into the creeks below." As they marched through a deep vale they beheld on either side a "bed of rocks nigh 1000 feet high forming a most awful appearance

showing the work of an Almighty hand in a remarkable manner."

The expedition rode only ten miles on the Fourth of July and pitched camp near the Mississippi. A number of deserted wigwams surrounded by "Patches of Corn Pumpions & beans" were observed, while many fine springs were seen "gushing from the hills in all directions." The next day a trooper ascended one of the highest peaks, from whence he could "discern the broad waters of the Mississippi & Lake pepin spotted with here and there an Indian Canoe which from the eminence appeared like dots upon a mirror." Three days later Kearny marched his men southward to Wabasha's village near where Winona is now located.

Kearny remained in this vicinity for twelve days, changing only now and then to secure better pasture. Chief Wabasha came into camp with his head men on July 19th and made a treaty. "We have seen but few of the soux & those we have seen give us a poor idea of this tribe," reports the journalist for that day. "They are mostly a dirty thieving race living in the most abominable filthy manner. The Sacks on the contrary are cleanly & decent in their appearance." A search for minerals revealed no "oar except Iron & Ocher." The country was "broken & mountanious except a narrow strip of level land upon the Mississippi." In all the valleys were "fine streams of cold water filled with

fish of all kinds but the most numerous are the spotted brook trout." Trade was reported to be "poor with these Indians on account of their poverty."

On July 21, 1835, Kearny led his dragoons homeward through what is now southern Minnesota. After crossing a branch of the "Iway," probably the Cedar River, he suddenly found his way blocked by a long lake stretching as far as the eye could see from north to south and from one-half to three miles broad. "The officers are now assembled to concert measures to get out of this difficulty," wrote the dragoon in his journal. "In the meantime the men are taking their rest in the shade their horses grazing beside them. No name is mentioned by Geographers for this lake. The land about here is good. Grass & herbage of all kinds in the highest natural state. Grass 8 ft high. One of our Indians killed a grey Eagle on the lake shore. Signs of Beaver Muskrat and otter." Late that afternoon Kearny succeeded in passing the outlet and the dragoons rode on by "handsome lakes" and "romantick" landscapes which exceeded in "beauty & fertility" any country thus far seen.

The following day Kearny met a party of Sioux who informed him that he was on the waters which empty into the St. Peter's River. No nearer home than when encamped at Wabasha's village, Kearny made a forced thirty-five mile march southward,

probably along the course of the Blue Earth River. That night the tired dragoons encamped on the open prairie in what is now Kossuth county, "without wood and bad Water & consequently without eating." One of the weary men wrote they were "wandering about like half starved wolves" and nobody seemed to know in what direction to go.

For eight days they rode southward through rich prairies interspersed with lakes and groves. The weather was warm but not excessively hot. "During this season," declared Lieutenant Lea as he rode through grass six feet high, "the appearance of the country is gay and beautiful, being clothed in grass, foliage, and flowers." On August 2nd they spent six hours crossing a tributary of the Des Moines by means of a raft. The following day they "Crossed the Des Moines by a Ford."

Continuing down the west bank of the Des Moines they crossed the Lizard, Bluff, Beaver, and numerous other creeks, and pitched their tents at the Raccoon Fork on a spot which Lieutenant Lea described as a "grassy and spongy meadow with a bubbling spring." There Lea and two other officers feasted on a fat young deer and enjoyed a bottle of fine old French brandy which Lea had carried in his wallet untasted throughout the campaign.

On the following day, Colonel Kearny examined the locality as a site for a fort. Although the Des Moines River was one hundred and twenty

yards wide he found it easily fordable. On the east bank stood an abundance of timber, such as oak, walnut, elm, ash, linn, and cottonwood, which would prove useful for firewood and building material. But Kearny did not regard the place as suitable for the erection of a military post. Transportation of military stores on large boats was extremely uncertain; the Sacs and Sioux were at peace and needed no such barrier; the site at the upper fork of the Des Moines was much more practicable; and the Indians themselves opposed the erection of a post on the Raccoon River "giving as one of their objections, that the Whites would drive off the little game that is left in their country."

Lieutenant Lea with one dragoon and an Indian was dispatched down the Des Moines in a cottonwood canoe to explore the navigability of the stream, while Kearny followed along the right bank with his detachment of troops. According to Lea, he started on his "toilsome task, sounding all shoals, taking courses with a pocket compass, estimating distances from bend to bend by the time and rate of motion, sketching every notable thing, occasionally landing to examine the geology of the rocks, and sleeping in the sand despite the gnats and mosquitoes." The general character of the country bordering the Des Moines he found to consist of "level meadows, rolling woodlands, and deep forests." The soil was unusually productive and wells could easily be dug in the highland prai-

ries whenever natural springs were absent. From the Raccoon Fork to the mouth of Cedar Creek, the Des Moines was "shallow, crooked, and filled with rocks, sand-bars, and snags" but below there was no obstruction to navigation. Minerals of all kinds were found throughout the course, including sandstone, limestone, bituminous coal, "oxide, sulphuret and native sulphate of iron, lignite, and the earths usually found in coal formations."

The rations of the expedition were low and Kearny ordered the dragoons to horse on the morning of August 10th on the last stretch of their eleven-hundred-mile journey. Fording the Otter and White Breast creeks, they reached Appanoose's village on August 15th. The next morning they crossed the Des Moines and pitched camp near Keokuk's village. Three days later, on August 19, 1835, they reached Fort Des Moines at two in the afternoon having been absent almost three months. "Sickness and all Disease has been a stranger to the camp & all have enjoyed good spirits except that stupidity caused by the want of food & upon the whole I can say we have had a pleasant Campaign," concluded the dragoon diarist.

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