

In the Fields

In 1838 the United States was still a nation of farmers. The North and South were divided on the slavery issue. Internal improvements, and the disposition of the public domain were burning sectional issues over which the East and West haggled bitterly. Lured across the Alleghenies by rich, cheap, abundant land, the pioneer agriculturists carved out seven new Western States — Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana — during the first quarter of the nineteenth century, sapping the original thirteen States of much of their man power. The admission of Arkansas (1836) and Michigan (1837), followed by the clamor for the division of the Territory of Wisconsin in 1838, only served to heighten the jealousy between the East and the West and accentuate Southern apprehension.

Every effort was made in the East to induce disgruntled farmers to remain at home. In the spring of 1838 the *Yankee Farmer* told of a man in Maine who had raised his wheat at a cost of not more than thirty-five cents a bushel. "Can Farmers raise grain at less expense on the Western Prairies, where it sells at half the price it brings in

Maine?" queried the eastern editor triumphantly. The question was promptly answered. "To be sure we can", replied the *Milwaukee Sentinel*. The western editor believed the "rich and productive" prairies between Michigan and the Missouri River could produce more wheat on a single acre than Maine could on three acres. "Why, we should say it would take more time, hard work and money, to clear off the timber and underbrush from ten of your wild acres in Maine, than to *acquire* a large Farm in Wisconsin, and put a crop in to boot. Humph! we should as soon think of comparing the jungles of Siam with the delta of the Nile as to place the woods of Maine in competition with the prolific Prairies" of Wisconsin and Iowa.

When the new Territory of Iowa was created the press and the people were almost unanimous in their praise of its soil and climate. "Iowa is a great Territory", declared the *Davenport Iowa Sun*. "The agricultural advantages of this country are immense; and lying as it does, for hundreds of miles along the western margin of the majestic Mississippi, its commercial conveniences are certainly surpassed by no interior state in the union. No country is capable of supporting a larger amount of population."

After pointing out that the Territory already had a surprisingly large population, the editor

concluded: "Let our friends in the east, not attempt to dream, that we are here in a wilderness." The Black Hawk Purchase "has much the appearance of an old country. The same amount of *capital* and *labor* that would make a handsome farm in Pennsylvania, New York, Maryland, Virginia, or in any of the old thirteen states, in twenty-five years, would make a better and handsomer farm in Iowa in *one-fifth* of that time. This may surprise many farmers who have not seen this country; but it is nevertheless true. Industrious persons who select Iowa as a home, may safely promise themselves the richest, the most abundant rewards for their labor. The *idle* had better keep away."

Cutting Marsh, a missionary among the Stockbridge Indians of Wisconsin, considered the Black Hawk Purchase "most valuable" for "agricultural purposes" and thought much of its fertile soil was "unsurpassed" by any land he had seen east of the Mississippi. Marsh believed the rolling prairies of southern Iowa would "abundantly reward the labors of the husbandman". The soil on the Red Cedar could raise "corn and vegetables in great abundance" with "comparatively little labor". The lower Des Moines Valley seemed to be "formed by nature for agriculture" and would soon "be covered with flocks and herds".

Although Father Mazzuchelli was schooled in the ways of a clergyman, his analysis of the future productivity of the country was not unworthy of an agronomist. "The land of this Territory is very fertile, especially towards the south;" he observed. All kinds of "grain can be cultivated there, domestic animals find rich pasturage for seven months of the year in the vast prairie lands." As a horticulturist, however, he was scarcely entitled to the rôle of a prophet. "But no fruit bearing trees are native there, and those transplanted from other countries rarely come to maturity; the apple is the only fruit that seems to suit the soil and climate of Iowa, especially in the upper part".

Albert M. Lea was particularly interested in the agricultural prospects of the country and made many observations and inquiries concerning it. "The agricultural productions", he recorded, "consist chiefly of maize, wheat, rye, oats, and potatoes. The large white corn of the south may be produced as far north as Rock Island, and yields from fifty to one hundred bushels per acre; but the yellow flint-corn grows well anywhere, and yields from forty to seventy-five bushels per acre; the latter is the more certain crop. Wheat is produced with a facility unknown except in the west. I have known the sod of the prairie to be simply turned over, the seed harrowed in, and thirty bushels per

acre to be harvested. But the usual crop, after the first, is from twenty-five to forty bushels per acre with negligent farming. Oats yield usually from sixty to seventy bushels per acre, and seventy-five bushels have been cut at Du Buque. Potatoes grow abundantly, and are famous throughout the west for their fine quality."

Unfavorable weather, always a hazard for farmers, seriously threatened Iowa crops in 1838. The year began so mildly that one Dubuque farmer was found "prairie breaking" on New Year's Day. Mid-January was likened to "Indian summer", with the Mississippi free of ice. Winter struck like a rapier in February: the wind whistled "rudely and loudly" through the log cabins at Burlington, the Mississippi was soon frozen as "tight as a drumhead", and the weather turned so cold that Burlington thermometers were "all too short". March came in like a lion but went out like the proverbial lamb, steamboat arrivals being recorded at Dubuque before the month closed. The weather was so "mild and balmy" that many planted vegetables, only to have them "nipt" by the chilling April frosts. May was cold and rainy. Bottom lands were flooded. As if in perverse response to the Burlington editor's complaint that there had been no more than a day or so of "warm weather", the month ended with a killing frost.

Farmers gloomily predicted a poor harvest unless June brought warm weather. By mid-June the rains had come in answer to the "prayers of the righteous" and herbage could be seen almost "hopping from the earth."

Extremely warm weather in July proved "favorable for harvesting" around Burlington, and the *Iowa Territorial Gazette* expressed delight with the flattering accounts of crops. In no case were they "less characterized for their excellent quality than for quantity." There would be "enough and to spare" to meet the "vast influx of population" and still allow something for exportation. Wheat was only fair but a large yield of corn and oats was expected and it was generally felt that these would "rarely ever fail" in Iowa. "For potatoes and turnips", the *Gazette* declared, "we will yield to no country on earth. Every species of garden vegetables, suitable to the climate, can, too, be produced of a size and quality and in an abundance, unsurpassed."

A month later, on August 18th, the *Iowa News* reported "very unfavorable" weather for farming. "We understand that considerable quantities of wheat have spoiled in the shock, in consequence of the frequent rains which have taken place since the time of cutting. Corn, which has now come to perfection, cannot ripen fast during damp and

chilly weather, yet should the fall prove dry and warm, the crop will prove very good. Rains, such as we have lately had, are unfrequent in this country. The quantity of hay usually put up will fall short of previous seasons, unless we soon have a change of weather." August showers were followed by a long season of drought.

Despite adverse weather conditions, there were ample evidences of the natural productivity of the Iowa soil. In October the Burlington editor was shown a small quantity of Baden corn which grew ten to fourteen feet high and promised to yield well when properly cultivated. In December a twelve-foot stalk of Baden corn with "eleven tolerably sized ears" was brought to the office of the *Iowa Territorial Gazette*. It was taken from a Van Buren County field and the editor was assured that the yield would amount to 150 bushels an acre.

Several remarkable vegetables were exhibited by Iowa farmers. "Beat This!" exclaimed the *Iowa News* on November 17th when a Jackson County farmer produced a cucumber weighing five pounds and three ounces and measuring eighteen inches in length and sixteen inches in circumference. A melon was raised by N. J. Lymon eight miles from Davenport that was two feet long, three and one-third feet in circumference, and weighed twenty-three pounds. "Here is another specimen

of the productiveness of the soil of Iowa", boasted the *Iowa Sun*. "These elegant lands will soon be all occupied by industrious and enterprising settlers" who would have to "undergo many privations" for a short time but would ultimately surmount all obstacles and be abundantly rewarded.

It was not merely the hope of attracting more immigrants to the Territory of Iowa that caused optimistic crop reports. The pioneers were also doing some wishful thinking. They needed surplus grain to sell for cash with which to pay for their claims. Some of these sturdy farmers had come to the Black Hawk Purchase with the first influx of settlers in 1833; over half had arrived after 1836. They had toiled hard — staking out their claims, clearing the forests, breaking the tough prairie sod, sowing and harvesting their crops, raising their cabins, building sheds, and constructing fences. They had done all this with little cost except their labor. Iowa land was first offered for sale by the government in October, 1838, before some of the settlers had time to accumulate the necessary funds. Small wonder, then, that the farmers were concerned about the crops in 1838. One Burlington merchant offered to pay the highest price for corn and cattle, meeting the farmer at his home before October 19th, or paying him spot cash at the land sales.

Probably the census figures provided the most reliable evidence of the fertility of Iowa's soil, as well as an index of the crops being cultivated. According to the United States census of 1840, the total yield of cereals in Iowa that year was 1,788,051 bushels, divided as follows: 1,406,241 bushels of Indian corn, 154,693 bushels of wheat, 216,385 bushels of oats, 3,792 bushels of rye, 728 bushels of barley, and 6,212 bushels of buckwheat. The potato crop totalled 234,063 bushels. Although the amount of wheat raised was not sufficient to feed the 43,112 inhabitants in 1840, it was estimated that the total cereal production was more than five times as much as was needed. In 1838, with half the population and probably less than half as much land under cultivation, production must have been fifty per cent less than the total two years later. This is all the more likely because of the late spring and wet August in 1838.

The Territory of Iowa had also forged ahead in livestock. The census of 1840 enumerated 10,794 horses and mules, 38,049 cattle, 15,354 sheep, and 104,899 swine. This was probably a little more than twice as many as in 1838. It is interesting to note that the total number of livestock was practically double the census figures for the Territory of Wisconsin.

Newspaper editors filled their columns with ad-

vice for improving the methods of agriculture. Thus, farmers were advised to boil potatoes before feeding them to stock. This was alleged to increase the nutrition so that only half the quantity would be needed. An excerpt from the *Yankee Farmer* printed in February at Burlington maintained that timber cut during the winter would last longer. When a farmer near Dubuque caught and raised a young elk the local editor suggested that persons might make it a "profitable business" to catch elk calves in the spring and train them to maturity, when "a swifter sleigh ride could not be had in Lapland" than with an elk-drawn sled on the Mississippi.

The methods of agriculture in 1838 were not much improved over those practiced by the American colonists on the Atlantic seaboard two centuries before the Territory of Iowa was created. The reaper had been invented but was not yet being manufactured. A 160-acre farm could be staked out and purchased for \$1.25 an acre: a century later the average value of land was around \$88 an acre. In 1838 the log cabin was raised in the Black Hawk Purchase at virtually no cost save the labor of the pioneer and his neighbors. In 1930 the average farm dwelling in Davis County cost \$1676 while that in Scott County cost \$3266. Comparison of the price of farm implements then

and now is indicated by the disparity in cost of a breaking plow and a tractor. Although the prices farmers received for their products during the 1830's were almost the same as those received a century later, the difference in the total value of production was tremendous. In 1840 the value of poultry of all kinds was \$16,529. In 1936 Iowa poultry was worth \$26,841,552, while eggs added \$40,205,502 more to the total value of farm products which amounted to \$537,105,540. The most optimistic editor or farmer of 1838 could scarcely have conceived the changes which a century was to bring in agriculture.

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