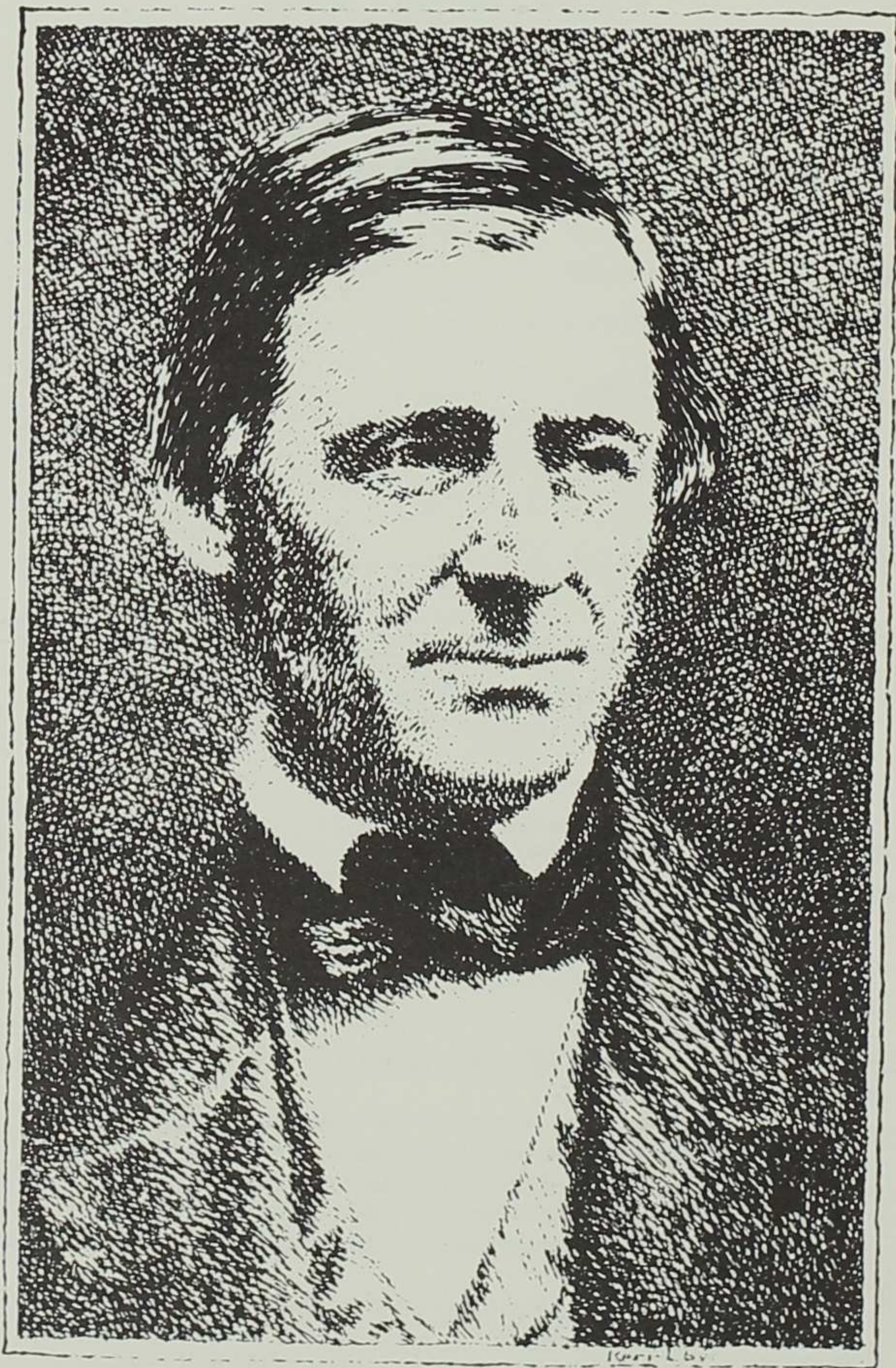


EMERSON IN THE MIDDLE BORDER

by
Anthony Bukoski



An 1854 pen and ink drawing of Emerson by Kerr Eby (courtesy of Harvard University Archives).

In 1850, Ralph Waldo Emerson, at age forty-seven, when Margaret Fuller and other friends had finally despaired of his ever making such a trip, came West. He left behind him in Concord his wife Lidian and his children, Edward, Edith, and Ellen. To Thomas Carlyle, the Scottish essayist, he wrote about his tour that the prairies and forests of Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri were magnificent. Never had he witnessed the likes of them. Emerson found that Margaret Fuller and his other friends who had been there, even as far as the Red River Valley in the case of Louis Agassiz, had not exaggerated their claims. And if they had, they certainly could not be blamed--the open spaces, the great, wide sweep of the rivers lending themselves as they did to hyperbole.

Emerson was hardly the first public figure to have his imagination captured by the immensity of the West. Nor did he wear the buckskins of the more adventurous, or roam so far afield. Washington Irving undertook one often-discomforting excursion into the "vaunted regions...several hundred miles beyond the Mississippi," which he recounted in *A Tour on the Prairies*. This was a full 15 years before Emerson left Concord for the "Far West." Francis Parkman, who, before finishing at Harvard had already contracted, as he called it, "Injuns on the brain," also set out for this new land. He recorded his impressions of the plains, the buffaloes, the

Indians, and the westward movement of the white man in 1849 in *The California and Oregon Trail*.

But Emerson contributed far more to the cultural development of the West than these earlier visitors. Though "the Sage of Concord" did not lecture on the 1850 trip, he saw what the frontier promised, and two years later returned to St. Louis, travelling west almost every year after that. Each time he came he took a more active interest in the region. Inspired no doubt at least partly by lucrative speaking fees, he brought what many settlers so dearly longed for: the culture of the East. To many of the "rough, grisly Esaus" of Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, Emerson with his New England values represented a link with the past.

He had, moreover, a quality of provocativeness. According to David Mead in *Yankee Eloquence in the Middle West*, the principal responsibility of speakers in the Western lyceum, men such as Emerson, Henry Ward Beecher, Frederick Douglass, and Edward Eggleston, was to stimulate their listeners to "individual effort, to induce thought and discussion." This Emerson did better than many as his long list of speaking engagements would confirm. Whatever else their complaints, the Concord transcendentalist rarely failed to pique the curiosity of his audience. If his listeners were not always appreciably better for having heard him, they were at least wiser, more introspective.

Competition on such lecture tours was stiff. Nor was it infrequent that Emerson



An 1839 drawing by J. W. Barber of the central part of Concord, Massachusetts (from the Concord edition of *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Vol. III, 200*).

found himself earning less in an evening than someone like John Gough, the Temperance leader, or Charles Sumner, who may have spoken in the same town only a week or two before. Even though Emerson's reputation was soon to stretch from Bangor, Maine to Davenport, some speakers were still more successful. Part of the reason may have been that as an orator, he was not particularly gifted. While one listener in Keokuk said "Emerson was like a glass of cold water," another, in the same audience, responded that she "might acknowledge the coldness" but for her "the clearness of water was greatly wanting." Sometimes, too, as in a Beloit, Wisconsin, *Journal* editorial of January 10, 1856, Emerson and several other imported lecturers were criticized for their seeming lack of respect of their audience. "With the same compensation now paid to eastern lecturers," wrote the *Journal* editor, "there are plenty of men in our principal towns who could origin-

ate as much thought, wit, poetry, or logic as we have heard from any who have addressed us this season."

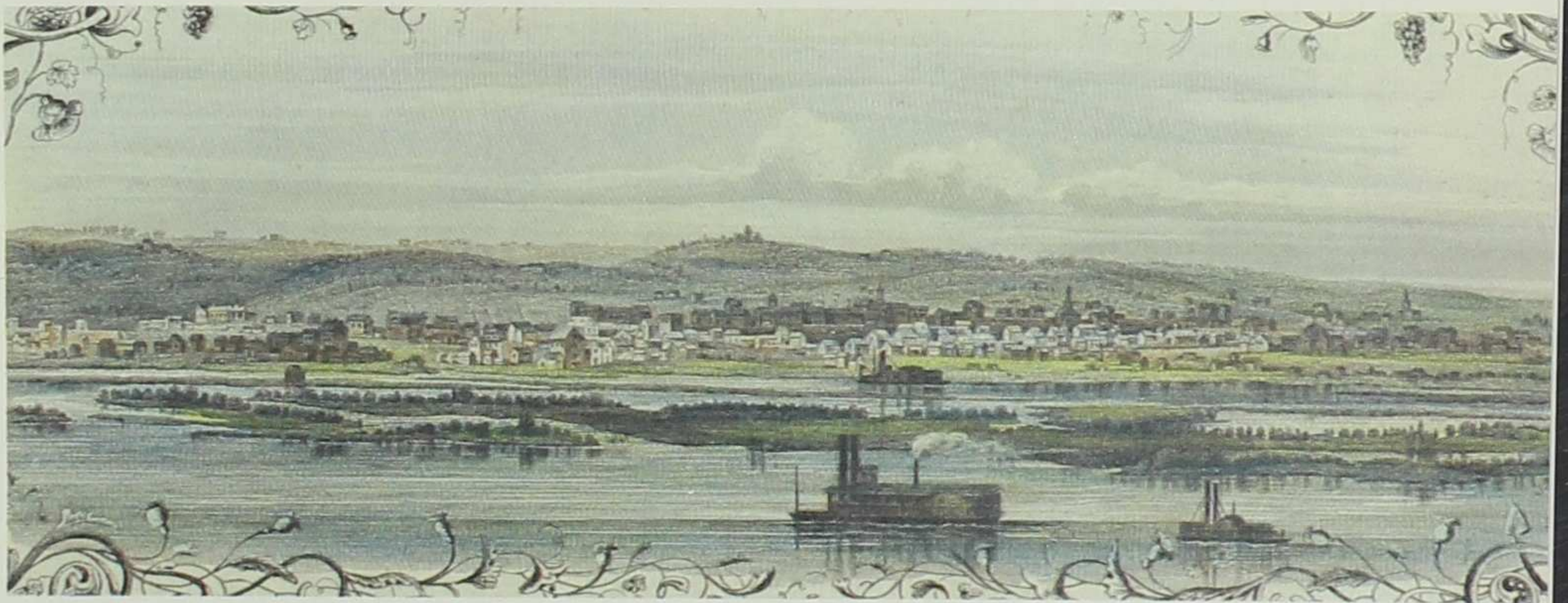
In spite of numerous reservations in the papers about his ability as an orator, and in spite of the occasional critical review, such as the one in the *DeWitt (Iowa) Observer* of January 26, 1866, telling of his treating "his audience in a most... insulting manner..." by thumbing "over at least one half of his manuscript unread," Emerson, undaunted, always self-reliant, returned again and again to the West. In fact, after his first visit, he travelled within a 16-year period five different times to the state of Iowa. During those years he lectured in such places as Davenport, where more than once he crossed the frozen Mississippi on foot, in Dubuque, Lyons, DeWitt, Washington, Independence, Cedar Falls, Keokuk, and Des Moines, visiting such other cities as Burlington, Mason City, and Iowa City.

Even more numerous were his Wisconsin appearances. He journeyed there seven times between 1854 and 1867, speaking on 23 different occasions in cities as far apart as LaCrosse and Milwaukee. Sight unseen, he purchased 120 acres of land in the northwest part of the state on Bass Lake in Burnett County, an area that at the time was still wild and virtually uninhabited. He was, it would appear, putting his faith in the West by buying stock in its future.

He came to Minnesota only once, perhaps because of the difficulty in making anything but east-west railroad connections from Concord. (Once in Iowa however, steamboat travel was excellent except in winter.) He was, nevertheless, quite fond of the state. One of his last times west, he spoke in Winona, Fari-bault, St. Paul and twice in Minneapolis, finding this last city especially attractive. From there he wrote his daughter Ellen on February 3, 1867 that "if Edward wishes to come out West, let him come here." And three days later in a letter from Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, he told his friend Benjamin Wiley that "such a

citizen of the world as you are should look once at these northern towns which I have seen under the perhaps too smiling face of the mildest, best winter weather, which may be exceptional, though the people almost to a man extol their climate. Minneapolis would strongly attract me if I were a young man . . ."

Clearly, Emerson had found the West a place to celebrate. "This rough country," he called it in his Journals. Writing to Carlyle after his first visit to Wisconsin, he proclaimed: "Younger and better, I had no doubt been tormented to read and speak their sense for them. Now I only gazed at them and their boundless land." The same was true of what he saw in other states. If, at first, he considered the people here "culturally starved primitives . . ." who were concerned only with "prices and sections and quarter sections of swamp lands," his attitudes changed. Several times, as in the *DeWitt Observer* editorial, the essayist's disrespect earned him nothing but the sharpest criticism. Such difficulties occurred with less and less frequency, however. For Emerson was quick to sense the growth of an inde-



A hand-colored lithograph of Dubuque circa the mid-1850s around the time Emerson spoke there.



A hand-colored lithograph of Davenport circa the mid-1850s.

pendent western spirit, one which would not countenance "Atlantic dandies" who had nothing positive to offer. Once, after a "stout Illinoian" had stomped out of a lecture, Emerson reflected that "the people are always right (in a sense), and . . . the man of letters is to say, These are the new conditions to which I must conform."

To a lesser person such conforming might not have come so easily. As one writer says, the change in Emerson's attitude may be taken as testimony "to the flexibility and the sincerity of the man, and to the influence of the frontier upon American letters." Having met too many dynamic and keen-witted individuals in the West, Emerson no longer saw the people here as "ten years old . . . in all that is called cultivation." From early in 1856 what had sometimes been a less-than-

ideal relationship with his audience and the press began to change so that he could write to Lidian at the end of his tour that year, "I have seen some very good people, and have had some experiences useful if I were younger."

No more at odds with "these sinewy farmers of the north," as he once called them, Emerson began singing the praises of the new land and of the "rough, yeomanly . . . Giants" inhabiting it. A place where "the trees were so large, and so many of them, that a man could not walk in the forest, and it was necessary to wade up the streams" could only be spoken of in superlatives. Here "the prairie grass . . . was over the tops of carriages . . ." A man unaccustomed to the prairie "could easily get lost in the grass." To hear Emerson speak of it, the West was a veritable garden of delights. In the spring

after the snow had melted, the maple trees ran so fast with sugar that a person often could not "get tubs fast enough." Setting a healthy table posed little problem either when "the hunter on the prairie at the right season has no need of choosing his ground" so plentiful the game.

But in such a rude country, there were difficulties and inconveniences. In many places the amenities of the East did not exist. From Washington, Iowa Emerson wrote of the mud and melting snow that made roads and paths "bottomless universal quagmires." To compound the problem, the lyceum was a winter activity. "I went out northwest to great countries..." Emerson wrote to Carlyle in 1854, "rode one day in a sleigh; sixty-five miles through the snow (seeing how prairies and oak openings look in winter)." The 65-mile sleigh ride was only one of many discomforts. In 1866, during a walk through the melting of a heavy snow, he told a young Washington (Iowa) editor, "you are prisoners of your sidewalks."

In the minds of many people midway through the last century, "the Sage of Concord" was nowhere so easily conjured as in the New England lecture hall. Few other names summoned up images of the genteel world of the Boston Brahmin as did Emerson's. In his essay, "Self-Reliance," after all, he had written that "the soul is no traveller; the wise man stays at home." Yet January on the second westward journey found him suffering "the cold raw country...and plenty of night travelling and arriving at four in the morning to take the last and worst bed in the tavern...Mercury 15 degrees below zero." From Beloit a few days later, he would add, "mercury varying from 20 degrees to 30 degrees below zero for the last week." Another time

after a week of sub-zero temperatures, he heard a landlord remark, "We had no cold weather, only now and then Indian summer and cool nights."

According to Emerson's son, the "inactive" Mr. Emerson found the "exposure and discomfort" anything but debilitating, bearing up under these hardships "as a philosopher should." "Almost invariably," Edward wrote of his father, he "returned refreshed and stimulated by his winter's experience in the advancing West." Faced with the unpleasant prospect of a sleigh ride in the fierce cold, as was too often the case, the elder Emerson may have found strength in this poem from the Journals:

When the wind bloweth strong, hoist thy
sail to the top.

'Tis joyous in storm not to flinch.

Keep her full! keep her full! none but cow-
ards strike sail.

Sooner founder than take in an inch.

To return as often as he did in the face of these difficulties, the future of such western states as Iowa, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Minnesota must have been to him of paramount importance. In his "Anglo-American" essay, he praised the practical democracy of the West. He spoke with pride of the country people whose "sense of freedom and equality was never interrupted," adding that such was "the condition of all the states fifty or a hundred years earlier." Wisconsin, where only months after Emerson's first tour a runaway slave named Joshua Glover was freed and the Fugitive Slave Law declared unconstitutional, must have offered hope to one whose disaffection with Massachusetts over the issue of slavery led him to criticize its public officials and its idealist faction, "who

might have taken Boston long ago" had they "the pluck of a louse."

News of the development of the land out West intrigued him too. One night in a Washington, Iowa hotel room, he listened intently to plans for bringing the railroad through that town. And a few years earlier in 1855, he had fallen prey to the popular dream that the railroad already extended to the Pacific, when in fact it had barely reached Iowa City. His enthusiasm was matched by the people here. Settlers in Iowa and Illinois, after raising a shanty, clamored for the railroad as "the breath of life." For with it, the crops could find their way east. But one railroad, Emerson found, was only a start for these indomitable farmers of the middle border. Until they should have a second and third to underbid the shipping costs of the others, he said, they were dissatisfied.

He also heard with interest plans for a railroad connecting Lake Superior and the Puget Sound. While in Wisconsin, he addressed the state legislature in Madison, toured the high schools and colleges, and made the acquaintance of such powerful men as C. C. Washburn, the future governor. In such cities as Delavan and Ripon, he delivered his lectures, often riding from one place to another by sleigh. One can only guess how he would have enjoyed the state seen in the more favorable dress of springtime. To Emerson it was the "heroic age."

In late January 1867, he arrived for the first time in Minnesota. A few days before he came to Winona, a heavy snowstorm had buried much of the southeastern part of the state. Then the temperatures plunged well below zero. He arrived under these most unpleasant conditions,

driving in an open sleigh. From there, railroad connections existed to St. Paul, where, just as he had in Wisconsin, he toured the state capitol. Minnesota's Governor Marshall accompanied the Concord Essayist on the morning after he had spoken to one of the largest audiences ever assembled in St. Paul's Ingersoll's Hall. The 1867 journey marked his one and only time in Minnesota, though as was often the case in cities where he spoke, requests were made for his return.

By this time there were probably few places left in the West where Emerson's reputation did not extend. If not so dramatic as Walt Whitman's, Emerson's celebration of the West was nonetheless effective, even profound. There was in Emerson that fascination with the new man, with his places, his nicknames, which had so entranced Whitman. The West was a rugged and honest land, and Emerson sang its praise in his letters and journals. He relished its names, in the hope they brought. "You know a Michigan man is a wolverine; a Wisconsiner a badger; Illinoian a sucker; an Indianian a hoosier; a Missourian a pike; Iowan a hawkeye; and Ohioan a buckeye. The people are rough grisly Esaus," he wrote Edith in 1860.

In addition to the Yankees, who comprised much of the western population, here were "hundreds of Swedes, Norwegians, Germans, and Dutch." Long before, Margaret Fuller had told him about the women, who were "brought up to work in the open air." If the life was not always soft, then the people were to Emerson all the more admirable. What he found out here was the material of legends. And he had a hand in the shaping of them. "I had travelled all the day before through Wisconsin, with horses,"



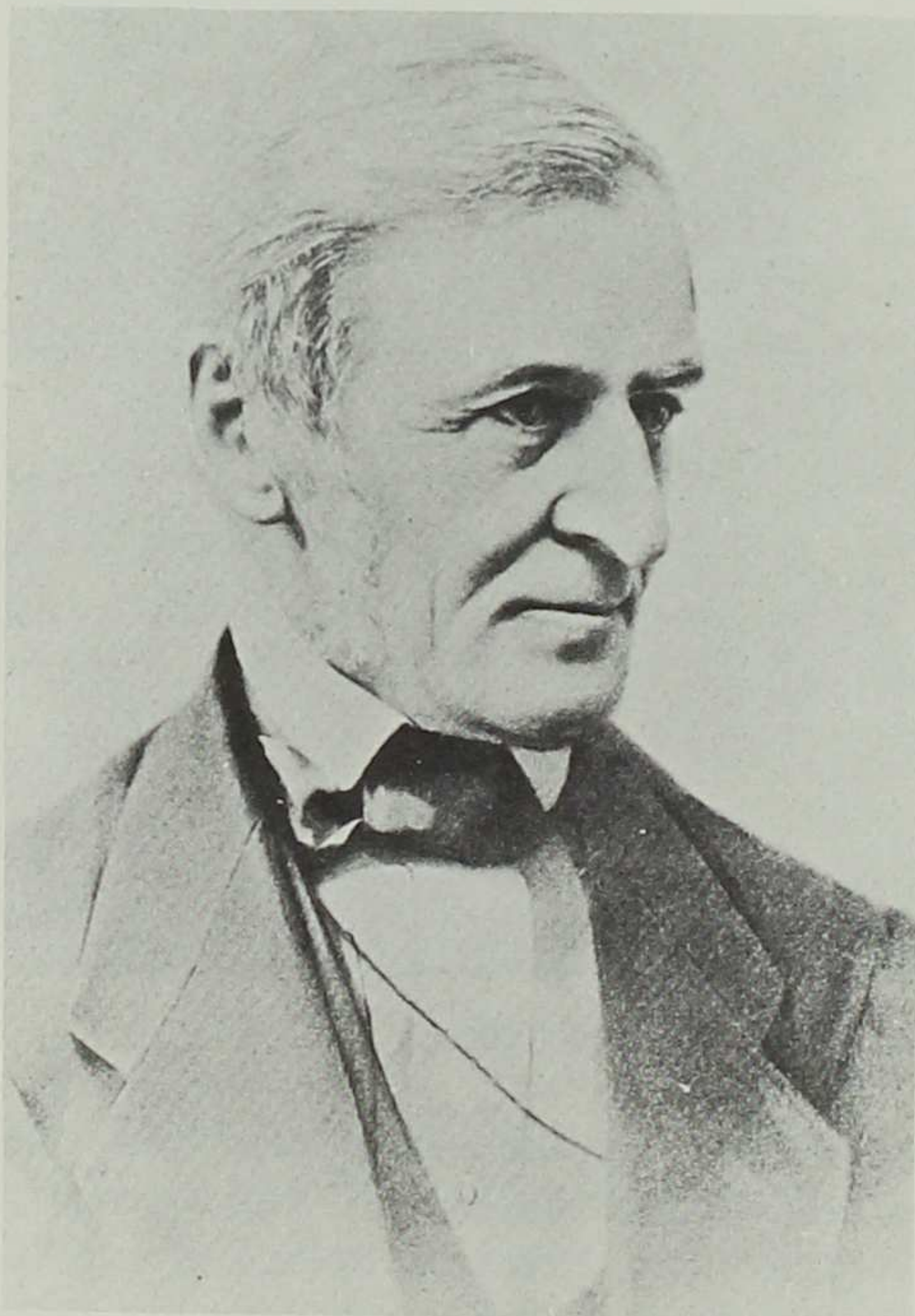
A hand-colored lithograph of Burlington circa the mid-1850s.

wrote Emerson on February 13, 1860, "and we could not for long distances find water for them: the wells were dry and the people said, they had no water but snow for the house. The cattle were driven a mile or more to the lake." Speaking before such ruggedly independent people was, as he confided in his journals, "a new test for the wares of a man of letters."

There was a vitality about this new land. The people were as irrepressible as the man who came out here winter after winter. If, toward the end of his western tours, Emerson came to "speak their sense for them," there were very few middle borderers complaining about it. "Ralph Waldo Emerson," wrote the Davenport *Democrat* on December 12, 1867, "occupies to-day the highest

place in American literature; honored, admired, and studied. . . ." And the Washington (Iowa) *Press* one and a half months later said, "Let those go to hear him who can relish fresh and new thoughts. . . . All such will hear something worth hearing, and have the satisfaction of seeing the man who, more than any other, has enabled us. . . to claim for America a literature which we may admire. . . ." Similar sentiments were offered throughout the West.

By the 1860s, an enduring respect had grown up for the essayist. On February 7, 1860 the Madison, Wisconsin *State Journal* called Emerson "the most original and subtle thinker which America has yet produced." And on the last day of 1865, the Milwaukee *Daily Sentinel* carried these words: "If any man has pene-



An early photograph of Emerson in his old age (courtesy of Harvard University Archives).

trated to the very heart of American life it is Emerson." Little more than a year later, *The Cedar Falls Gazette* wrote of Emerson that although "the first impressions of the man . . . were disappointing; . . . the lecturer had to speak but a short while and his audience became aware that, though he was 'a plain, unaffected gentleman . . . and looked like an educated well-to-do farmer,' he was no common character." Accolades like this followed wherever he travelled. One newspaper editor in Independence, Iowa wondered if there were any more pro-

found thinker in America than Emerson. And the day after he had spoken in Des Moines, *The Daily State Register* of March 2, 1867 wrote that, "The lecture last evening fully sustained the scholarly reputation of the speaker. It was one of the rare treats of a lifetime to be permitted to listen to such a pleasing, instructive, and solid entertainment, and our citizens will always welcome Mr. Emerson to our city with delight."

Having travelled for almost 17 years under the most adverse circumstances to be here, Emerson, the Concord transcendentalist, had become something of a fixture in these western states. He was alive to the cultural significance of the lecture system. After speaking in Janesville, Wisconsin one night in the winter of 1866, he wrote his daughter Ellen that, "The institution of these Lyceums is a stroke of heroism in each town,--desperate if it snows or blows on the appointed evening." But, after stepping from the podium in Dubuque on December 8, 1871, he did not speak in the West again. He was approaching 70 years of age, and, according to a Dubuque newspaper report, lecturing had become "a visible strain" on him. Yet when he returned to Concord, his sympathies remained with these "yeomanly . . . Giants" who had so impressed him over the years.

What Emerson said of one Wisconsin town, describing it as "a wonderful growth that shines like a dream . . . from the top of Amory Hill," could just as well have been true of any place he visited

here. For all of Emerson's West was seen, as it were, from the top of a high hill. This region was his hope, and he witnessed first-hand the people to whom its destiny was entrusted. When he found them equal to the great task set before them, there was every cause for joy. To

Emerson, the West "was a good new country with plenty of robust people." Here was "America in the making, America in the raw...." With encouragement and support, Emerson had aided in the growth of the country. □

Notes on Sources

The most important sources for this article are *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, eds. Edward W. Emerson and Waldo E. Forbes, 10 Vols. (Cambridge: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1909-14); *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph L. Rusk, 6 Vols. (N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1939); and *The Correspondence of Thomas Carlyle and Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1834-72*, ed. Charles Eliot Norton, 2 Vols. (Cambridge: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1883).

Excellent studies of Emerson's lectures in Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota and the contemporary newspaper accounts of those lectures can be found in Hubert Hoeltje, "Ralph Waldo Emerson in Iowa," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, XXV (April 1927), 236-76; Hubert Hoeltje, "Emerson in Minnesota," *Minnesota History*, II (June 1930), 145-50; and C. E. Schorer, "Emerson and the Wisconsin Lyceum," *American Literature*, XXIV (May 1953), 462-75. A note on Emerson's purchasing land in Wisconsin is in Hubert Hoeltje, "Emerson's Venture in Western Land," *American Literature*, II (January 1931), 439.

A discussion of the origin of the lyceum system as well as its impact on the Middle West and on Ohio in particular occurs in David Mead, *Yankee Eloquence in the Middle West* (Lansing, Mich.: Michigan State University Press, 1961). Those interested in the role of the orator in American literary history may find a helpful chapter in Robert Spiller *et. al.*, *Literary History of the United States*, 3rd ed. (New York: MacMillan, 1973), 541-62.