

Comment by the Editor

ALTITUDE AND SETTLEMENT

Is there any relation between altitude and human migration? pondered the Mentor, not aware that he spoke aloud.

Why do you wonder, inquired the Man from Iowa, who happened to overhear the query.

In the habitat of other forms of life, altitude seems to be very important, if not, indeed, a determining factor, continued the Mentor, scarcely cognizant of his auditor. Various types of vegetation seek their proper levels where conditions are most favorable. Alpine flowers do not flourish at sea level, nor do orchids bloom on the mountain top. There is a big difference between the jack rabbit of the plains and the cony of the Rockies. Perhaps the same natural law applies to human kind.

What you say may be true of extremes, commented the Iowan, with an air of doubt, but can the rule be applied to a large area in which the differences in elevation are relatively slight? Corn seems to grow as tall in Lee as in Dickinson County. Mountain ranges have indeed been effective barriers between racial groups, but what possible influence did altitude have on the settlement of Iowa?

No doubt accessibility, building material and fuel,

water power, navigability of rivers, and the peculiar assumption that the prairie was sterile, replied the Mentor, were dominant factors, yet altitude was incidental to most of them. Trace the advance of the settlers across your Commonwealth, and you will find that they followed in general the courses of the wooded streams — and the direction of the valleys indicates the lay of the land. Is it not a fact that the highest portion of Iowa was settled last?

Yes, agreed the Iowan, but that might be explained by the remoteness of that section from the source of migration.

Only partially, insisted the Mentor. Council Bluffs and Sioux City on the Missouri River were thriving towns before Clarinda and Cherokee were founded, while Des Moines was the capital of the State when Mason City was only a frontier village. The pioneers, like an inundation, sought the lower levels first, without regard for latitude and longitude. A map of the spread and rise of population in Iowa according to the several censuses might show surprising likeness to the physical topography of the State.

It just occurs to me, added the Man from Iowa, that this year Mason City, Marshalltown, and probably several other cities are celebrating the seventy-fifth anniversary of their establishment. If some enterprising geographer should draw a line through all such places he would thereby locate the boundary of the frontier in 1853. Then we might see how much altitude had to do with settlement.

J. E. B.