

Bowen's Prairie

Few travellers along the military road between Cascade and Monticello realize that they pass the site of the village of Bowen's Prairie, which during the latter half of the nineteenth century was a prosperous little settlement. To-day the region is a quiet farming community, and the remnants of by-gone years are decreasing. As the visitor approaches from the east, he sees an old brick schoolhouse, and across the road a small cemetery. The schoolhouse is crumbling, its long diagonal cracks patched with mortar. The cemetery, with its uneven fence and its gates slightly ajar, is in a state of semipreservation. On the graves of some of the pioneers — for no one is buried there any more — the grass is kept trimmed by loving descendants. In other parts, the weeds have grown high, obscuring the worn headstones.

West of the cemetery the farmhouses are built more closely together, and stand very near the highway. Some are rather new, while others, although freshly painted, bear the marks of earlier days. One group of dwellings is particularly compact, the houses being placed almost as if comprising a city block. On one corner stands the old Congregational Church, discolored and weatherbeaten, with the boards beginning to wear away. Unused for many

years, it is one of the last landmarks of the former village.

It was nearly a century ago that the settlement of Bowen's Prairie was started. Hugh Bowen and John Flinn came to Iowa from Ohio in 1836, to seek a permanent home in the newly opened land. Charmed by the "beautiful scenery, the fertile soil, the salubrious springs, and other desirable attractions," they chose this location as being admirably fitted for farming.

The whole stretch of high, level prairie upland which lies between the north and south forks of the Maquoketa River west of Cascade and east of Plum Creek soon acquired the name of its first settler. Others came to make their homes "on Bowen's Prairie", and so the name became attached to an area comprising nearly two townships. The original settlement, which gradually developed into a village, was also called Bowen's Prairie, and it is to that restricted community that most of this story refers.

Hugh Bowen was well qualified to be the father of a community. He was a bachelor in the prime of life, a veteran of the Black Hawk War, and was both physically and mentally able to cope with the problems of pioneer life. R. J. Cleaveland, an early resident of Rome Township, Jones County, described him as being "erect as an Indian and clad in buckskin like one; of great energy and rare simplicity of character. He was a noble specimen of a Western man, untainted by the vices, and entirely free from

all the silken disguises, subterfuges and hypocracies which prevail in old settled countries; undaunted and fearless as a lion in the discharge of his duty; simple and confiding as a child in all the little suavities and amenities of life and illy prepared to guard against the advances of the well-dressed fancy-man, black-leg, gambler of the present day [1879].”

Hewing down the trees on the site they had chosen for their home, Bowen and Flinn constructed the first log cabin in the neighborhood. The structure did not long stand alone, for other men who were also seeking greater opportunities came from the east and joined the two hardy pioneers. Among these early patriarchs of the prairie were Moses Collins, Charles and Joshua Johnston, Alfred Weatherford, Thomas Denson, Gillespie Laughlin, Franklin Dalby, and Thomas Dickson. They were a rugged lot, with a vigor and determination that characterized the future generations on Bowen's Prairie.

Some of these early settlers were heads of families, while others, like Bowen himself, were bachelors. One of the latter group, William Moore, was not to remain single long, for he was courting Elvira Neal. The affair culminated in their marriage in 1837, and the tongues of both men and women buzzed with pleasurable excitement over the first wedding on the prairie. Happiness was predominant, overcoming trifling difficulties. The ceremony was to take place on Bowen's Prairie, and Jacob Hamilton,

a justice of the peace at Whitewater in Dubuque County, promised to officiate. Dressed in his best homespun, he came to the scene of the wedding on the appointed day, only to realize that he was outside his jurisdiction! The bride and bridegroom were momentarily disconsolate; it looked as if the wedding must be postponed. But the bride's face brightened when the justice suggested that the wedding be transferred to a spot just over the Dubuque County line, three or four miles distant. Accordingly Mr. Moore and Miss Neal, Mr. Hamilton, and Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Dickson, the only attendants, walked along the narrow road to the neighboring county. With the blue sky as a canopy, and a group of massive oak trees as a background, the marriage vows were exchanged. The only music was the song of thrushes, the only flowers, woodland blossoms; yet it is hard to imagine a more romantic setting. How much more beautiful and impressive was the ceremony than if it had been performed in the dimness of a log cabin!

Contrast this happy occasion with an event which occurred on the prairie in the following April, 1838, an event which brought sighs of sorrow whenever it was recalled for years afterward. Alfred Denson, a six-year-old boy, had been playing near his parents' cabin, with his mother watching him occasionally. At meal-time his mother went to the door to call him, but her calls brought no response. She went into the yard, shouting the boy's name,

and after looking in vain in all directions, decided that he was lost.

Mrs. Denson hastened to tell her husband, who spread the alarm throughout the neighborhood, after he had made a futile examination in the vicinity of his cabin. Thirty men, eager to find the lad, organized searching parties. Night came on, but torches were lighted as they resolutely continued to look for him. They searched the woods and valleys for miles around, crying "Alfred! Alfred!", and turning over every log, looking into every hollow tree and thicket. For four days and nights they tramped, their fears increasing daily. On the fifth day they found what they had sought, yet dreaded to find — the lad's body. It was in the timber only two miles from his home; he had apparently died the first night of cold and exposure. Sorrowfully the men carried the body to the Denson cabin, where the anxious parents, who by that time had given up hope for their child's safety, were gently notified. All the residents of the prairie gathered for the simple burial services.

The first white child born in Richland Township was Martha Ann Dixon, whose birth occurred in 1839. Mary E. Moore, born April 12, 1840, was the second. Her parents were the couple who had been married in the out-of-door ceremony two years before. Mary Moore grew to young womanhood on Bowen's Prairie, was married to Thomas A. King, and is now living with her son at West Union.

While Bowen's Prairie was still young, political development of Iowa Territory made elections necessary. The first election on Bowen's Prairie took place in 1838, in the cabin of Barrett Whittemore, who had just come from New Hampshire. Whittemore, later known as "the old schoolmaster of the prairie," was one of the most active workers in building up the settlement. When ground was broken at Iowa City in May, 1839, for the foundation of the Old Stone Capitol, it was Barrett Whittemore who was plowman.

At this first election eleven votes were cast. On August 5, 1839, a general election was held, and Hugh Bowen was named as the first sheriff of Jones County. One candidate for justice of the peace was accused of not being able to spell or sign his name. Denying the charge, he proceeded to show the voters he could qualify, and when he spelled Daniel "Dan-ill," he produced an affidavit that he had always spelled his name that way.

In 1839 the sight of United States soldiers constructing the military road from Dubuque to Iowa City became familiar to the Bowen's Prairie settlers. In May the surveying engineers passed through the prairie, locating the highway substantially where it now passes. James L. Langworthy of Dubuque was in charge of the construction of the road.

While the settlement was being developed with all the energy of the residents, there was still time for

diversion. In later years the Jones County fair was established on Bowen's Prairie, and an incident that took place during August, 1839, was perhaps a forerunner of this annual exhibition. Charles Johnston and Alfred Weatherford wagered a gallon of whisky on the outcome of a horse race. Their horses were to run eighty rods to a "stake and rider" fence. The contest was exciting. As the horses neared the goal, Johnston slackened the pace, but Weatherford, with an eye on the whisky jug, kept on "with all the madness of a Calmuck Tartar". Within twenty feet of the fence his horse slipped, throwing the rider and demolishing the fence. However, Weatherford was jubilant, for he won the whisky.

When the land sales for Jones County were announced to begin on June 22, 1840, the settlers were disturbed, for they feared that outsiders might attempt to buy some of their claims. Two sections of Richland Township were sold on June 25th for \$1,600. Many of the purchasers borrowed money at twenty-five or thirty per cent interest, because the government demanded cash. During the auction, the sales room was surrounded by a group of determined men, who were ready to inflict punishment on any one who dared to raise the bid of an actual settler. The government representatives, George L. Nightingale, auctioneer, and Thomas McKnight, receiver, wisely desired to avoid conflict, and made certain that the bona fide residents obtained the tracts they sought.

Bowen's Prairie became a separate election precinct on July 6, 1840. In the same year Hugh Bowen was appointed to take the official census. His report showed 290 males and 185 females residing on land which four years before had been inhabited only by Indians.

With an eager desire for knowledge, these men and women were not slow to take advantage of an act passed by the Territorial legislature providing for the establishment of common schools. Barrett Whittemore constructed the first schoolhouse on the prairie, completing it on October 19, 1840, and taught the twenty-nine pupils who enrolled in the first session, which opened on June 21, 1841. This term lasted until March 4, 1842, with but two vacations. The children apparently had more frequent vacations than those allotted, however, for the average attendance was fifteen pupils — half of the enrollment. Work at home or inability to reach the school because of bad weather were the common causes for absence. The tuition was \$3 a quarter, except for children under seven years, for whom the rate was \$2.50. For many years Whittemore continued as schoolmaster, teaching the settlers' children from such books as McGuffey's readers, Webster's elementary speller, and arithmetics by Smith, Pike, Daboll, and Smiley.

For years the schoolhouse was also the center of community activities; "spell downs", singing schools, and elections were held within its walls.

The settlers were of a social nature, and glad to break the routine of pioneer life with neighborhood gatherings. In June, 1841, the schoolhouse was the scene of the first of a series of religious meetings conducted by the Rev. Ira Blanchard, a Baptist minister from Castle Grove Township. He made appointments to preach there every fourth Sunday, and at his second meeting on July 24th, about seventy-five persons were present, the largest number assembled in Jones County up to that time. Some of the audience came fifteen miles to hear the sermon. John Gillman had conducted the first religious service on Bowen's Prairie on February 28, 1838, and preached every three weeks thereafter. Then each family had to be notified personally, but with the advent of the school, it was possible to reach many of the households by announcing a meeting to the pupils.

Gradually Bowen's Prairie was coming in closer contact with the rest of the middle west. In 1840 the weekly mail was still brought on horseback over the new military road, but in 1844 Frink and Walker started a four-horse stage coach which ran daily from Dubuque to Iowa City. The arrival of the stage was always an important event, and both driver and passengers were questioned eagerly for news from the east.

It was not until March 24, 1849, that a post office was established at Bowen's Prairie. Hitherto mail had been addressed to Cascade. Ebenezer Little

was appointed the first postmaster, his home serving also as an office. The mail itself was kept in a walnut secretary. Mr. Little was of Puritan descent, and possessed an uncompromising conscience. At one time Mrs. F. M. Hicks, his daughter, received a newspaper from a New York man who enclosed his written card, but Postmaster Little would not let her read the paper until the sender had forwarded extra postage for the written matter.

News of gold in California rang in the ears of many Bowen's Prairie men, who saw this as a means of obtaining capital to improve their farms. Not a few groups assembled supplies, and resolutely set out for the west during the late forties. Mrs. Thomas King relates that among the first of the men bound for California was a Scotchman named Micklejohns, who conceived the idea that he could make a fortune selling honey there. He set out for the west in 1844 with a hive of bees on a wheelbarrow, and was never heard from again. Many of the gold seekers crossed the western prairies directly, while others went back east and took the water route to California, going around Cape Horn, or crossing the Isthmus of Panama by foot. The majority went by water at least one way.

Meanwhile their wives and children were left alone in the log cabins on Bowen's Prairie, spending lonely days thinking of husbands and fathers whom they might never see again. Some of the gold seekers were lost, but most of them returned safely

to their Iowa homes after absences of from eighteen months to two years. Nor were their journeys fruitless, for several washed enough gold to buy fertile farm land and to build substantial homes.

The return of the Iowans from California marked the beginning of the most successful decade for the prairie settlement. The men began to farm in earnest; they were no longer pioneers, but residents of a settled community. They considered conveniences and improvements for which previously they had neither time nor money.

The building of the Bowen's Prairie Congregational Church in 1853-1854 was one of the first signs of community development. Since 1844 the New England descendants had worshipped at Cascade, but memories of the trim white churches "back east" were strong. A Bowen's Prairie Congregational Society was therefore organized on April 2, 1853, and in October, the foundation for a church building was laid. By the following June the structure was completed and dedicated with appropriate services. The first pastor was the Rev. E. Wright of Anamosa, who with four other men and five women constituted the list of charter members.

The neat frame church was the pride of Bowen's Prairie, admired even by those who were of other denominations. The choir at one time was composed of sixty voices with Otis Whittemore as director, and their singing brought visitors from all parts of the county. The steeple of the church contained

a bell which called the congregation to worship every Sunday. Part of the funds for the bell were contributed by Asa Bowen, Otis and Barrett Whittemore, and other men, while an additional \$100 was raised at a bell festival.

Otis Whittemore, who had donated the land for the church site, also gave a plot to the Methodist congregation for a building place in 1858. The Rev. Mr. Briar, who had been conducting Methodist services as a circuit rider, found a sufficient number of worshippers to start a definite organization.

It was the Congregational Church, however, which formed the nucleus for the actual settlement which to-day is pointed out as the Bowen's Prairie of the past. New houses were grouped closely around it, with the steeple towering above the other buildings as an inspiration. The cemetery was a short distance to the east, and in 1854 Otis Whittemore opened a store near-by, at which he sold dry goods and groceries for many years. C. G. Banghart was at one time proprietor of another store. In 1853 the immediate territory around the church was divided into lots, and again on July 21, 1856, another plat of a hundred lots was recorded. Thus Bowen's Prairie began to assume the outward appearances of a town, although a portion of the residents lived in a radius of four or five miles. The village was never incorporated.

The Civil War was perhaps the turning point in the growth of Bowen's Prairie. Until the sixties

the community had been constantly increasing in population and prosperity, but the onrush of the war, with increasing calls for enlistment, checked the development temporarily. Afterward, Bowen's Prairie seemed unable to recuperate.

Until July 19, 1861, Jones County had sent no company of its own to the Union army. Four men from Bowen's Prairie — Howard Smith, Orin Crane, Theodore Hopkins, and Isaac White — had enlisted in Captain William E. Leffingwell's mounted company. "Their departure for the seat of war was the occasion of a very pleasant scene which occurred at their rendezvous in the beautiful grove near the residence of Otis Whittemore. The Home Guards of Bowen's Prairie escorted them some miles on their way, after a solemn leave-taking."

Isaac White had not yet enlisted, but when Curtis Stone rode up on his finest horse, White said, "If I had that horse, I would enlist, too."

"Take it," was Stone's reply. "It is yours." White vaulted into the saddle and started for the place of encampment.

On the same date the following month, a newly organized company of Jones County volunteers met at Clark's grove near Monticello, for the presentation of a flag by the women of Bowen's Prairie. Men from Scotch Grove, Clay Township, and other communities arrived during the morning, and after partaking of a dinner furnished by the landlord of the Monticello House formed a procession of sixty-

four teams. The parade went to the grove with banners flying and drums beating, and was met by a procession from Bowen's Prairie. Emma Crane, representing the women of Bowen's Prairie, presented the flag with a "flowery and fiery" speech, exhorting the soldiers to be loyal to the Union and to be courageous in battle. Captain David Harper gave the acceptance with a pledge that his men would return with the flag or on it.

Similar incidents followed, as the calls for volunteers became more frequent and insistent. The majority of Bowen's Prairie residents were intensely loyal, but a few who criticized the Union were compelled "by hempen persuasion" to take the oath of allegiance. While the men were in the South fighting for their country, the women and old men operated the farms, and in their spare time the women scraped lint for use in military hospitals.

The days after the close of the war when the husbands and fathers were reunited with their families were joyous occasions. Tales of heroism and suffering were related to eager wives and children. A reunion for Jones County soldiers was held on August 14, 1865, at Clark's grove, the same place which the men had left three and four years before with heavy hearts. A large southern flag captured in Columbia, South Carolina, was proudly displayed by Company H of the Thirty-first Iowa Infantry, whose roll carried many of the Bowen's Prairie soldiers.

But the trials of the war were soon forgotten in

the zeal to renew farming activities. The men had perhaps aged more than their years implied, but they had a quickened interest in their homes and the welfare of their families. Interest in education grew. Many of the farmers sent their sons to Lenox College at Hopkinton after they finished the district school, while others enrolled in the Iowa State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts at Ames. The general custom was for these young men to attend college a term, and then teach a country school for a like period.

Farming was established on a sounder basis; the men began to raise better stock and to plan their work more scientifically. In 1867 the Ross cheese factory was started on Bowen's Prairie, near the residence of F. M. Hicks. It was a two-story building, twenty-six by one hundred feet in size, and as "neat and tidy as an old maid's band box," according to a representative of the Monticello *Express* who visited the place. The factory received the milk of one hundred and fifty cows, and manufactured as much as four hundred pounds of cheese a day.

The period of reconstruction, however, was not conducive to general prosperity, and while the Bowen's Prairie residents were financially able to weather the period of hard times, the settlement as a whole did not progress. Furthermore, the first settlers were growing old, and as the sixties and the seventies slipped by, they dreamed of spending their declining years in well-earned rest and comfort. As

a result many removed to Monticello, while a few went to Cascade. In both towns they built fine homes and did much to improve the communities. Their farms were sold to energetic young Germans who had emigrated to the United States, and to Irish farmers who had been living in the Cascade and Dubuque neighborhoods. The influx of Germans was noticed particularly in 1868, when a German Reformed Church was built in Richland Township on the south edge of the Bowen's Prairie district. The Rev. George Rettig was the first pastor. After a few years the organization of the church was changed to German Presbyterian. Services are still held there for a large congregation.

Even in 1879 the settlement was dwindling. The *History of Jones County* published in that year asserted, "Twenty years ago this was a village of considerable importance, but the building up of Monticello caused the removal of business to that place."

In 1893 the Congregational church on the prairie was passing into disuse, and was transferred back to the building society. In a few more years it was closed entirely, except for an occasional funeral, most of the members having affiliated with the Monticello Congregational Church. The building was eventually sold, the bell being purchased by the Golden Congregational Church at Buck Creek in Delaware County. When a group of men from that community came to remove the bell, they were halted in the church yard by Susie Flint, an old woman who

lived in the shadow of the house of worship. With a shotgun under her arm, she defied the men to enter the church, and it was only after considerable pacification that she relented.

The post office department records the official death of Bowen's Prairie on November 29, 1902, when the village post office of Bowen — the latter part of the name had been removed in June, 1883 — was discontinued. For some years the office had been virtually inactive, but the establishment of rural routes from Monticello and Cascade made its use entirely unnecessary.

Thus the opening of the twentieth century saw the disappearance of one of the earliest settlements in east central Iowa. In less than sixty years it had been born, had enjoyed a steady increase in population, and then gradually slumped. What caused the death of a village that at one time had been so flourishing? Perhaps the question is best answered in the prophetic comment: "Had Bowen's Prairie secured a railroad, it would have been one of the most important towns in the county."

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