

THE PALIMPSEST

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The Lay of the Land

From Marshalltown the Iowa River flows east until within less than ten miles of joining the Cedar River in the northeast corner of Johnson County where it turns directly southward and eventually enters the Mississippi below Muscatine. Meanwhile the Cedar River continues its southeasterly course to a point about ten miles north of Muscatine where it is deflected to the southwest and meets the Iowa at Columbus Junction. Nature apparently altered her purpose. Instead of the Iowa becoming a tributary of the Cedar in northeastern Johnson County, and the Cedar entering the Mississippi at Muscatine, according to the original plan, the two streams diverge and then the Cedar abruptly reverses its course and rushes to join the Iowa. The rivers behave like two lovers obviously intended for each other. The one persistently approaches the other from afar, though with much hesitant meandering if you will glance at

a map, and then at the last moment coyly turns aside (but not too far) while the other keeps matter-of-factly on his way only to realize that ultimate union depends upon him and then straightway he frankly seeks his mate.

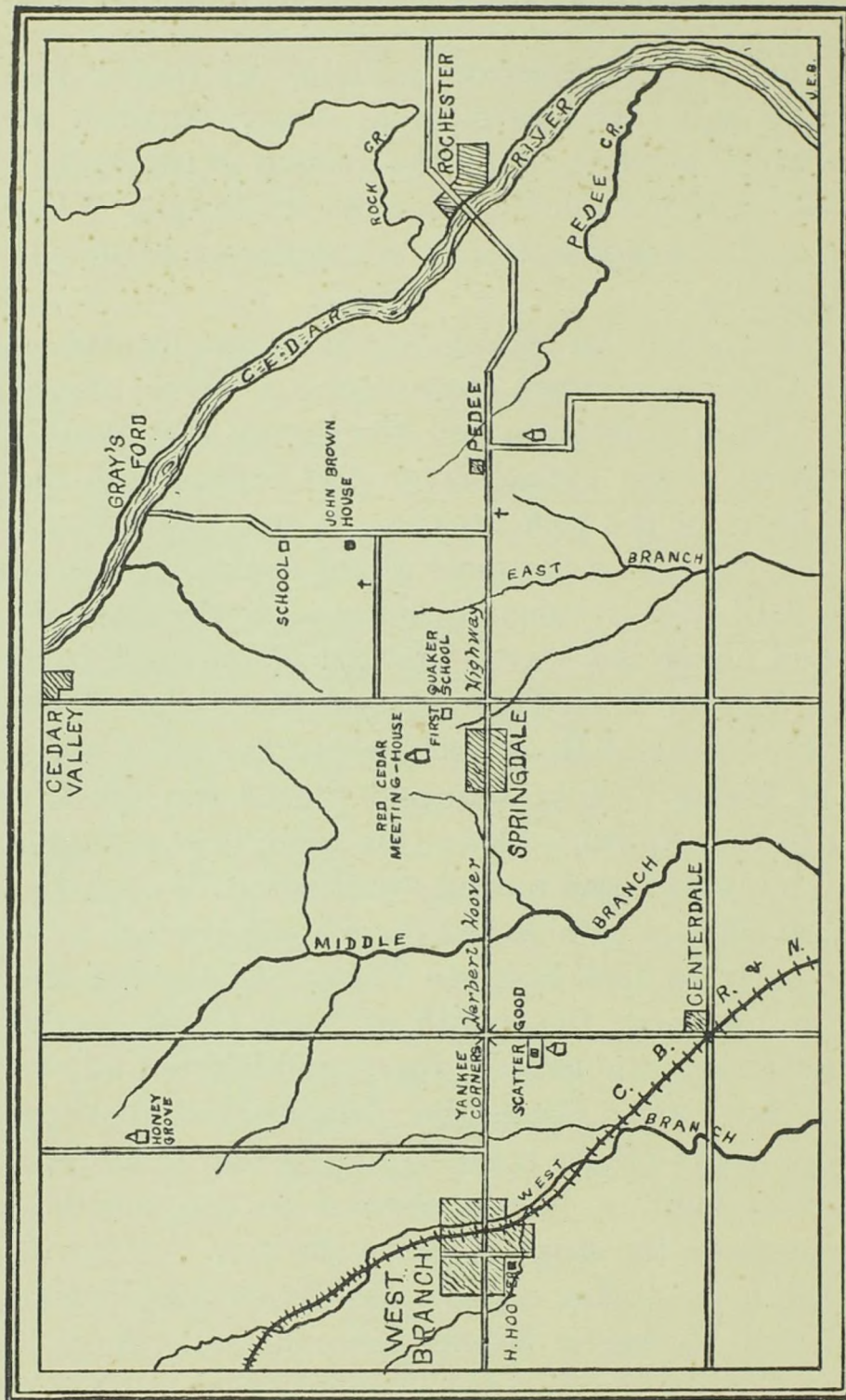
The egg-shaped area enclosed by the two rivers within the distance of their flirtation contains about fourteen townships, or approximately five hundred square miles. When the first settlers came, nearly a hundred years ago, the rivers were bordered by a fringe of timber — oak and walnut and elm and maple interspersed with wild plum, choke-cherry, and crab-apple. But beyond the timber, from east to west and north to south, stretched the virgin prairie — rich pasture for deer and elk and the home of innumerable quail and prairie chickens. From the vantage ground of a gentle hilltop the pioneer could gaze for miles in any direction over the majestic expanse of the undulating plain. In the summer when the grass was high and every hillside was radiant with prairie flowers it seemed like a terrestrial sea made glorious with color. Swell after swell receded over the surface of the land until the mighty rhythm of that tremendous symphony of form beat everlastingly into the soul of the beholder, while the wind made infinitely varied overtones of light and shadow on the grass.

For the settlers who came in the early forties this was paradise enough. The soil was rich and deep and black. The rolling contour of the country

provided natural drainage. Plenty of timber for building and fuel was close at hand. Springs of pure water bubbled out of the ground in convenient places. And the climate was most ^{healthful} salubrious. What more could be desired? It was a veritable garden of opportunity.

When the capital of the Territory was located at Iowa City the settlers came flocking in that direction. From Muscatine and Davenport they moved westward to the Cedar River and beyond into the very heart of the rich prairie. It was natural that they should follow the most direct routes. Taverns were built at convenient places and settlements developed along the way. The old stage road from Davenport to Iowa City crossed the Cedar River near the mouth of Rock Creek about five miles north of the Cedar County line and thence ran directly west to the capital. Along this road, now straightened, improved, and named for Herbert Hoover, the earliest settlers established their homesteads.

As early as 1836 Stephen Toney and George McCoy settled near the mouth of Rock Creek on the Cedar River, established a ferry, and laid out a town which they named Rochester. During the next three or four years others came to live in that vicinity, a mill was built, a tavern erected to accommodate travellers on the stage route to the new Territorial capital, a post-office called Rock Creek was located there, and Rochester became the principal village in Cedar County, serving as the county seat until 1840



A PAST AND PRESENT MAP OF THE SPRINGDALE COMMUNITY ON A SCALE OF ONE-HALF INCH TO A MILE

when Tipton was officially designated. Being strategically located, Rochester prospered for a time, but even before the Civil War the decline began. By 1870 the population was only one hundred and seventy-four, and in 1903 the post-office was discontinued. Now the most interesting thing about the place is a vague legend that this deserted village was the childhood home of Sarah Bernhardt.

During the two decades preceding the Civil War other settlements developed along the old road west of the Cedar River — Pedee, Springdale, and West Branch. Pedee, locally known as Stringtown because the cabins of the settlers bordered the road for nearly a mile, was the first to develop and for many years lent its name to the countryside for miles around. By 1845 the community had risen to the importance of having a post-office, located about two and one-half miles west of Rochester, and in December, 1849, a Presbyterian church was organized.

While Pedee seems to have been chiefly Presbyterian, most of the settlers who arrived during the fifties were of the Quaker faith. Gradually the village of Springdale, almost wholly composed of Quaker families, took form and a post-office of that name was established in 1851, though it was originally located two miles farther west near Yankee Corners (the boyhood home of Judge Horace E. Deemer). This peaceful village has always been regarded as the center of the Quaker community.

There the first meeting was organized, a splendid school was developed (the first whose graduates were admitted to the State University without examination), and thereabouts the descendants of the early pioneers still reside. Rural mail-boxes bear the names of Maxson, Mather, Negus, Branson, Pearson, and Varney — eloquent testimony of the stability of the founders of Springdale.

It was early in the fifties when David Tatum, James Townsend, Eli Hoover, and other Friends located on the west branch of Wapsinonoc Creek and the post-office of West Branch was soon thereafter established, though it was not until the construction of the Burlington, Cedar Rapids and Northern Railroad in the late sixties that the town was platted. About the same time an adjoining town of Cameron was laid out, but presently the established name of West Branch was accepted for the whole place. From a little country village the community developed into a town of over four hundred inhabitants in 1880 and now the population is twice that number. West Branch, like Springdale, has always been characterized by the Quakers who still constitute a large proportion of the residents.

From the very beginning the people who came to live beside the Iowa City-Rochester road between the east and west branches of Wapsinonoc Creek have constituted a peculiarly united community. Most of those who came before the Civil War were Quakers whose religious tolerance, simple living,

and moral standards imparted an atmosphere of peace to the whole settlement. Adherents of other creeds and representatives of divergent principles have mingled with the Friends without serious discord. The established tradition of harmony still prevails.

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