

## Encouragement to Move West

Most Irish emigrants settled in Boston, New York and other eastern cities. The Irishmen abhorred the thought of the wilderness. However, Iowa had an interest in every emigrant ship which left the shores of Ireland. People were needed to mine, farm, build railroads and do the many other jobs in a frontier area.

Charles Corkery, one of the first settlers in Dubuque, was an early advocate of Irish immigration to Iowa. On January 14, 1841, he wrote the *Philadelphia Catholic Herald* as follows:

My sole desire is to direct the attention of Catholics (Irish Catholics more particularly) to the country little known, and less appreciated in the East. . . . I have had ample opportunities of bearing witness to the testimony of many able and respectable writers (travellers and others) who unite in giving Iowa the happy cognomen of "the garden of America," The Eldorado of the West. . . . Irishmen unite in saying that our wheat and oats are nothing inferior to those of Ireland, and I have never seen better potatoes in Ireland . . . than those raised in the mining district.

Bishop Loras, soon after he arrived in Dubuque in 1839, began to encourage people to come to Iowa. Whenever he found a group he thought would become useful citizens, he ardently urged

their emigration. He repeatedly wrote letters to the *Boston Pilot* and other papers in which he invited people in eastern states and Europe to come west. When he was unfamiliar with areas of Iowa, he turned to Corkery for information. In 1854 Loras wrote, "Let good emigrants come in haste to the west of Iowa. . . . They will soon make whole Catholic settlements — some Irish, some German, and some French."

Before Iowa had gained statehood, the *Burlington Territorial Gazette* was favorably inclined toward Irish settlements. "Of all the foreigners who come amongst us," the editor declared, "the natives of the Emerald Isle are the most enthusiastic in their admiration of our institutions."

Various organizations, such as the Irish Emigrant Society of New York, urged the Irish to go west:

We would tell all to avoid the Atlantic cities, and to distribute themselves throughout the lands. . . . Thousands continually land entirely penniless and are at once in a state of destitution; whereas such person should have at least five pounds on his arrival to enable him to prosecute his journey to the interior.

The *Boston Pilot* likewise urged all emigrants to go west. The newspaper pointed out that the great numbers who joined the California Gold Rush were making the Midwest a better place to go. The paper suggested the unemployed Irish in New York and Boston should start walking west.

Yes, on foot! I advise them to walk a day and work a day, until they find a home. The best experience they ever got would be twelve months' journey Westward, walking and working as they went along. The man who does this, and faces toward the setting sun, will find the home he seeks at last.

The *Pilot* frequently published letters from Irish in Iowa. Michael O. Sullivan of Dubuque wrote early in 1850 that emigration to California was beyond all conception. Farmers were selling at a great sacrifice and now was the time to buy land cheap. It was actually selling for less than half what it did a year before.

Land could be obtained at a reasonable price in Dubuque, Jackson, Linn and Jones counties. At least 10,000 people could be taken care of. Woodland would cost \$4 to \$8 an acre in Dubuque County, \$2 to \$4 in the others. A good yoke of oxen would cost \$45 to \$55.

In another letter Sullivan wrote that he had seen indications of suffering and partial destitution around Boston. He had no doubt that any part of the West "affords the hardy laborer and the mechanic facilities that it would be vain to expect in any of the old settled states." Miners and farmers were earning \$13 and board per month. Provisions were cheap, he wrote; first quality flour cost \$4 a barrel and chickens seventy-five cents a dozen. Many people who came five or six years ago penniless now owned 160 to 640 acres, all paid for.

An area, where there was nothing but forest two years ago, "now resounds with the noise of machinery and the hum of industrious mechanics and laborers. Cities and villages spring up, as it were, by magic. It appears more like fancy than actual reality." Another inducement to the Irish was the moral, religious and social order of the community. Robbers and swindlers were not countenanced. "They are hunted like beasts of prey till they are banished from our land."

Sullivan had a word of warning for the Irish.

They must not be too sanguine. They must consider the genius of a rising community. They must not be shocked at the idea of living in a log cabin or of wearing rough clothing, and, at first, of sacrificing many things perhaps they enjoyed in the old home. If they come fortified with industrious and steady notions they will most certainly prosper.

He could speak with assurance on the latter point. At the time he wrote there were at least 1,722 Irish in Dubuque County out of a total population of 8,236. Although they were less than twenty-five per cent of the population, they had property valued at \$355,000 or more than a third of the total for the county.

Edward Gillin was another who wrote letters to the *Pilot*. He called attention to DeWitt where there were already a half dozen Irish families. He thought that mechanics, especially blacksmiths, joiners, wagonmakers, saddle and harness makers,

tailors and shoemakers, could do pretty well in the West. Certainly there was no real danger of starving. Gillin summed up his views, "As for Iowa, I have not travelled much of it as yet; but as far as I have seen, I have met nothing to surpass it, little, if any, to equal it."

The year 1859 was another in which Irishmen of moderate means were again urged to move west. "Farms that would have brought \$50 an acre in Illinois or Iowa a year ago, can be readily purchased for from \$15 to \$20 an acre, and this is the finest land in the world!" Land purchases were attractive because many were going to Pike's Peak.

First hand accounts were also given the Irish. In 1869 Samuel Sinnett of Muscatine visited Ireland where he made known the beauties of Iowa. Upon his return home, he received a number of letters asking for more information.

The Boston *Pilot* summed up the situation thus:

We would exhort every one who may read what we write, to turn their thoughts and their faces away from the overcrowded and tax-oppressed seaboards, where the flood of immigration is filling the pauper houses. Even as *paupers*, the new comers would have a far better chance in the cities and settlements of the interior, where food is far cheaper than here. Everything counsels a quick departure from the seaboard cities; the apprehension of penury, and pauperism, and crime, not less eloquently exhort our people to go to the West, then the sure promises of competence, comfort, and ultimate opulence which its agricultural resources offer them.