

Along the Old Military Road

During the four days that Marc and I walked over the Old Military Road from Iowa City to Dubuque probably no less than twenty sympathetic people invited us to ride in their motor cars. Hundreds went by in a cloud of dust with never a sidelong glance. Of those who deigned to stop, some rode in magnificent touring cars and some in one-seated Fords; some were kind-hearted farmers on an errand to town, some were professional tourists, and once near the end of a thirty-mile stretch three jolly girls insisted that our company would be ever so pleasant. Not once did we condescend to accept, and never did the good Samaritans fail to wonder at our stupidity.

So as we trudged along we were many a time compelled to explain to ourselves such a ridiculous method of traveling. In the first place, we reasoned, it would be fun to discover if the Representatives who walked to the Territorial capital earned their three dollars for every twenty miles traveled. We decided they did. Another excuse that we tried to accept was that walking afforded the very best physical exercise — and we were on a vacation.

But the principal justification was our desire to

compare the old road as we found it with the one that used to exist. To be sure the route is almost identical, but the landscape has changed and so has the traffic. In order to visualize pioneer scenes one needs to go slowly, while halts and repose are essential if one is to sense the romance of primitive travel and of the picturesque people who have passed that way, of legends that may have been true, and of villages long since forgotten.

At one end of the trail stands the Old Stone Capitol: it was in the process of erection when the road was first built. Of the many who enter the old building there are only a few who are reminded by the well-worn steps, that they tread a pathway of the founders of this Commonwealth. Governors, congressmen, judges, presidents, far-sighted lawmakers, rough-shod pioneers, and travelers from the ends of the earth have climbed those steps and worn away the solid rock. These hallowed stones, mute evidence of that pageant of the past, are what make the place a shrine. To mount those steps, forgetting the lapse of time, and to walk in imagination with the notable personages of long ago in the presence of the things they saw is to be thrilled by the lives they lived.

On the road to Dubuque it is a little more than a four-hour walk from the Old Stone Capitol to the Cedar River where only a small summer shack marks the site of the once flourishing village of Ivanhoe, Iowa. Before the road was surveyed a

venturesome trader named William H. Merritt, who pitched his tent on the bank of the river was so deeply impressed by the "beautiful scenery" and the stillness that "seemed to pervade the whole atmosphere," that all through his life the village that later developed was held in tender remembrance.

Anson Cowles laid out the town at the intersection of river and highway. It is said that keel boats were built at this point for the shipment of grain down stream in the spring, but Cowles' visions were not of a commercial metropolis. He planned to establish a great university to be governed by rules of his own devising. One-half of the plat, when the land became valuable, he proposed to donate as a permanent foundation. Not far from the campus was to be a large park where he would assemble all kinds of birds and beasts that inhabited Iowa, and teach them to dwell in harmony. His large and magnificent residence was to be by the side of the road where he could entertain strangers and point out the places of interest. In the garb of an Indian chieftain he was to ride in a curious equipage — a chariot built on a marvelous plan, drawn by six elk in trappings of beaded buckskin, each elk to be ridden by an Indian in full native costume. But all of this mental frostwork was dissolved by an untimely death, and nothing is left but tradition to tell of the foibles and virtues of Anson Cowles.

Not all of the Ivanhoe residents were imbued with such lofty ambitions but some of them won recognition in other ways. One of the earliest physicians in Linn County was Dr. Sam Grafton who hung out his shingle in Ivanhoe. George Greene was both lawyer and schoolmaster there before he was sent to the legislature and nearly a decade before he became judge of the State Supreme Court.

Wherever the famous old thoroughfare of earlier years intersected a river there a village was founded. Every one of those pioneer settlements is now a prosperous city — with the single exception of Ivanhoe. For some unaccountable reason this crossing was never a popular place. The principal settlers either died or moved to Mount Vernon, Cedar Rapids, or Marion. The timber along the Red Cedar River, as the stream was then called, was a refuge for horse thieves and dealers in counterfeit money. To this day the grandsons of pioneer settlers speak in awed tones of the Ivanhoe ruffians' rendezvous. But now every vestige of the village is gone. Not one among thousands who traverse the old road ever heard of the village of Ivanhoe and if inquiry were made perhaps few could explain why the Ivanhoe Bridge was so named.

The three other river towns have survived — Anamosa, Monticello, Cascade. There were only four or five settlers at the Buffalo Fork of the

Wapsipinicon River when the Old Military Road was surveyed. The following year Thomas Cox was engaged to lay out a town to be named Dartmouth. The place was later called Lexington, but when the county seat was transferred from the village of Newport the name Anamosa was adopted.

A story is told of three Indians — a Winnebago chief, his squaw, and their beautiful daughter — who came one day to the village of Dartmouth. They attracted attention on account of their cheerful demeanor, easy dignity, and look of intelligence. The name of the chief was Nasinus and his daughter was called Anamosa. They made such a pleasant impression and the name of the girl seemed so proper that the town was named in her honor. It is said that she afterward fell in love with a young engineer and rather than marry the Indian her father had chosen she ended her life by jumping from a ledge at High Bluff.

There is an air of romance and beauty in the Wapsipinicon Valley and the earliest settlers wrote to their friends of the charm of the hills. It was raining the day that we entered the valley but in spite of the inclement weather the glimpses we caught of turreted walls of clean gleaming limestone, the primeval forest that seemed to close in on the highway, and the vistas that opened down enchanting ravines, all contributed to a feeling of complete fascination.

The surroundings lend credence to the old legend concerning the name of the river. Long ago when the red men roamed over Iowa a beautiful Indian maiden named Wapsie lived with her father on the bank of the river. In another tribe two days away toward the setting sun there dwelt a Sioux warrior named Pinicon. Now it came to pass that Pinicon fell in love with the beautiful Wapsie and Fleet Foot, his rival, determined to kill him. One day when the two lovers were canoeing the jealous Fleet Foot watched from the shore. Talking, laughing, and entirely unconscious of danger, Wapsie at some word from Pinicon put her hand to his lips. Like a flash an arrow flew from a thicket and pierced the heart of the unfortunate Pinicon. Wapsie sprang to his side and in doing so overturned the canoe. Together, the water closed over them — Wapsie-Pinicon. Their voices can still be heard in the rippling stream that bears their names.

On an autumn day three years before the Old Military Road was established, Daniel Varvel, a valiant native of Kentucky, came to the mouth of Kitty Creek on the South Fork of the Maquoketa River. The view that greeted his eyes was surpassingly beautiful: then and there he decided to build his new home. Jack Frost had already painted the well-wooded hillsides with gorgeous splashes of crimson and yellow and brown. Over the hills the fertile prairie extended beyond the

horizon. No homeseeker had appeared there before, no axe had disturbed the wild solitude, no plowshare had ripped through the sod.

For years the Varvel log cabin was a landmark in Jones County. The wayfaring traveler stopped there for the night, it served as headquarters for the men who laid out the old road, the mail that came once a week was thrown off there. One by one other cabins were built in the neighborhood. A two-story hotel about twenty feet square was erected. The settlement grew and came to be called Monticello.

The traveler who now visits the flourishing city can scarcely imagine such humble beginnings. Gone long ago are the trails of the Indian and the smoke of his wigwam; gone too are the primitive methods of travel and with them, perhaps, the spirit of fine hospitality. Instead there are well-arranged boulevards and industrious factories, the sight of an airplane is a common occurrence, and neighbors are no longer acquainted.

A little cascade in the north branch of the Maquoketa River was a natural allurements for millers. As early as 1844 two pairs of burrs made of limestone were busily grinding "very superior flour." Within a few years Cascade was a prosperous village. While the stagecoach stopped for an hour at Steel's Tavern the enterprising young real estate dealers boomed corner lots to the agents of eastern investors. What a glorious future for a

town, they said, where the power from a waterfall nine feet in height was available! To this day at least one lot is owned by the heirs of those early speculators. But alas, more than water is needed to make a great city. No railroad came to Cascade and when the stages stopped running the bright prospects were ended.

Transportation is the magic that produces great cities. In the days of prairie schooners and stagecoaches the road from the port of Dubuque to the capital of Iowa was a main traveled highway of commerce. When the weather was fair in the fall of the year huge wagons were loaded with grain and hauled to the market. Slowly, ever so slowly, the big horses or oxen pulled their creaking and cumbersome load along the old road. Returning they brought household supplies for the winter. The passenger traffic was carried in fine Concord coaches or in "jerkies." Gracefully poised on the strong leather trusses the stagecoach dashed by the slow freighter and, enveloped in dust with the team at full gallop, drew up at the tavern with much grinding of hickory-shod brakes. The doctors and preachers rode horseback.

As towns are established in the wake of a newly-built railway, so the pioneer settlers took claims adjoining the Old Military Road. The most desirable places were squatted on first, so that instead of homesteads at regular intervals along the whole distance, several families lived in one

neighborhood miles away from another such settlement. Through the efforts of George Wallace Jones or Augustus C. Dodge mail routes were established and the cabin of some prominent settler was selected for a post office. Then someone would begin selling dry goods and groceries, a blacksmith would come to shoe horses, a school would be opened, and a church organized.

The village of Pamaho affords a typical instance. Four miles to the south from the Wapsipinicon River on the crest of a hill, a site for a town was selected. For a number of years the people who lived in the three or four cabins called the place of their residence Pamaho. On account of the pleasant location the name was changed to Fairview. In the fifties the town began growing and though handicapped by possessing no water power the rich agricultural region promised steady development.

But the builders of railroads neglected Fairview and the promise was never fulfilled. Without transportation the village has died. Many houses that border the road are deserted and almost all are in sad need of repair. The lawns have been seeded to ragweeds and dandelions. Cornfields overrun the old gardens. Here and there an old house has been left to decay: with the window panes broken, the clapboards awry, and the roof fallen in, its appearance is well-nigh sepulchral.

The silence that broods over the village seems

to indicate plainly that the people have all gone away. Throughout the whole settlement not a person is stirring. No busy housewife is hanging out clothes or sweeping the porch, no gardener looks up from his hoeing, no loafer is sauntering storeward, no children scamper hither and thither, and even the pigs and the chickens keep out of sight. Long years have elapsed since the side streets resounded with clattering hoofs and the rattle of buggy wheels. Those wheels are now mounted on posts at the street intersections where they serve the convenience of the rural mail carrier. The post office that was maintained for sixty-four years has been discontinued for nearly two decades.

No one would imagine that the church is in use: the tall grass in the yard is untrampled and the windows have a vacant expression. The schoolhouse, which at one time was no doubt a model, now seems to be outgrown and deserted. The bustle of business in the "Fairview Store" is a thing of the past. The board awning that once shaded the windows is falling away and its function is performed by numerous cobwebs. Not even a garage is maintained in the village. As the curious traveler now seeks the lost site of Bowen's Prairie and Ivanhoe, so before long Fairview will be gone.

It was noon on the fourth day of our pilgrimage. For eighty-five miles we had followed the path of

the famous old furrow. Only the route is the same, we were thinking. The landscape, the methods of travel, the habits of living — all are changed and little remains of the past. Then away to the left far over the hilltops we caught a glimpse of the gleaming slate roof of New Melleray Abbey. All is changed, were we saying? Ah, no! Within yonder walls men are living to-day by the old sixth-century rule of Saint Benedict.

Ten miles from Dubuque over a macadamized stretch of the Old Military Road and two miles through a beautiful forest that has been set apart for a State game preserve, these pious monks live in seclusion. Afar from the turmoil and strife of modern life they quietly read the *Lives of the Saints* and follow the customs that have prevailed in all Trappist Abbeys.

In summer and winter, fair weather or foul, they arise from their straw ticks at two o'clock in the morning and spend two hours in prayer. Then an hour and a half is devoted to mass before breakfast. They work in their fields until nearly noon, then they sleep until two. An hour is allotted for dinner. The rest of the day is consumed in deep meditation and reading. At seven o'clock they retire.

By an ancient rule of Saint Benedict the brothers are forbidden to speak. Only by special permission are any allowed to converse. Their clothing consists of a long gown of brown wool: rough

serge is worn next to the skin. Bread, rice, and potatoes are their principal diet: they never eat meat. The farm land, the buildings, and the thoroughbred livestock are all owned in common.

It was after two when we bade adieu to the old monastery, and the sun was just disappearing when we entered Dubuque. Behind us the curtain of darkness was falling over a hundred miles of the famous old highway replete with the memories of former times, and before us the lights of Hotel Julien Dubuque awakened no thought of Tim Fanning's tavern. We had arrived at the end of the trail.

JOHN E. BRIGGS