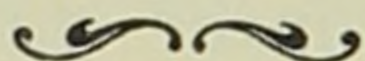


THE PALIMPSEST

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Sleighting Time

Cold winter is coming,
With frost in his train;
Cold winter is coming,
With snow and no rain;
Cold winter is coming,
With sleighing again,
With his fireside mirth, and his homely cheer,
The pleasantest time in the whole of the year.

It was with this lilting verse by J. D. Armstrong that the *Iowa Capitol Reporter* suggested to its Iowa City readers how they might make the most of the exhilarating winter weather. Iowa Citians scarcely needed this hint, for two weeks earlier, on December 14, 1844, this same paper had noted: "For the last ten days we have had first-rate winter weather. The snow averages about 12 inches in depth — sleighing is fine, and we have a fair prospect of a merry winter and prosperous courtships." Coasting and skating parties, bobsledding and sleigh riding with all the sociable events that usually accompanied these jolly winter pastimes,

afforded much happiness and relaxation to the Iowa pioneers.

Sleigh riding was perhaps the most typical of all winter sports. Well-to-do families owned their own cutters and sleighs. In the large towns and cities during the winter months livery stables rented gaily-painted omnibuses to private parties. These omnibuses, drawn by four horses, frequently carried more than a score of singing, shouting merry-makers. The popularity of sleigh riding was demonstrated by the frequency with which cutter, sleigh, and bobsled appeared in Currier and Ives winter scenes of town and countryside. In the merriest of all Christmas songs we sing: "Oh what fun it is to ride in a one-horse open sleigh." And, according to a typical Thanksgiving melody, "The horse knows the way to carry the sleigh, through the white and drifted snow." The nostalgia of the old-fashioned sleigh ride is recalled even today as "Bing" Crosby croons "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas".

The farmer's bobsled was important not only for the pleasure it afforded but for its utility during the cold winter months. On the wind-swept prairies the bobsled made mills and markets accessible to the pioneers. By means of his sled the farmer could bring food and fuel to his family; by means of his sled he could harvest a supply of ice

for the summer. The bobsled also brought the family doctor to the sick and ailing. It made possible attendance at church and school; happy family reunions and friendly visits with neighbors.

In 1840 a Muscatine editor observed with no small regret that sleighing was "never better" in the Galena-Dubuque region where deep snow had made the roads and prairies as "smooth as a barn floor". Dolefully he continued: "We can but envy our old friends of the mines their merry sleighrides. They do the thing up nicely. In our more southern regions we have had no pleasures of the kind thus far. The slight snows which have fallen, soon disappeared, leaving us a thin coat of mud to paddle through, while our northern neighbors have fine sleighing. Let southerners curse our cold winters as they may, give them to us as far preferable to a residence a little south, where every southern breeze produces mud, and every evening's shade a solid and rough pavement."

The winter of 1848-49 afforded excellent sleighing for Iowans. A citizen of Burlington declared that "sleigh bells are jingling merrily to the utter destruction of all the horse flesh that can be pressed into the service of Sunday revellers who seem determined to make the most of the New Year's holiday." A Davenport editor declared: "Everything with runners, or that could be made

to slide, has been called into requisition. The jingle of the merry sleigh bells has rung out upon the clear atmosphere, by day and by night, until it has become as familiar, as the younger voice of one's household! Long may it continue — until the bland atmosphere of spring displaces the ruder blasts of winter." The Davenport editor thought there was "poetry" in a sleigh ride.

Jingle! Jingle! down the hill —
O'er the meadows — past the mill —
Now 'tis slow, now 'tis fast —
Winter will not always last.
Every pleasure has its time!
Spring will come and stop the chime!
Jingle! Jingle! clear the way,
'Tis the merry, merry sleigh.

Sleighs were used to deliver merchandise in towns and cities. Most editors, however, called attention to the more spectacular social aspects of the sport. Sioux City enjoyed good sleighing in February, 1859, following a six-inch snow. On January 12, 1861, the Council Bluffs *Nonpareil* noted that sleighing was excellent and that "everybody so fortunate as to be possessed of a horse and cutter, or the wherewithal to hire the same, are having a 'gay time:' while printers, and other 'miserable cusses,' without enough money, credit, or friends, to afford a ride, look on approvingly.

Some day, after we've had an opportunity to try 'em, we'll tell you what livery stable keeps the best sleighing arrangements."

Rivalry sprang up between Council Bluffs and Omaha in February, 1861, over which town could produce the most impressive sleigh-riding omnibus. Omaha flung out the challenge when she sent a six-horse sleigh across the Missouri to Council Bluffs loaded with ladies and gentlemen. Council Bluffs countered with an eight-horse team decorated in red and white and expertly driven — not led — by John Forbes. Omaha thereupon sent over a twelve-horse team — led — which pulled the Omaha Brass Band. A number of four-horse sleighs, a four-mule sleigh, and many cutters were included in the Omaha parade to Council Bluffs.

The editor of the Dubuque *Times* recommended a swift sleighride behind a "bobtailed nag" as the most delightful form of winter sport. "Jump into a *bijou* of a cutter", he declared, "and if you have a headstrong horse give him full rein. Away you go — snow balls flying full in your face from the horses's feet, and the sleigh every now and then grating harshly over a stone, in a manner well calculated to make you set your teeth together after the style of heavy tragedy men when they desire to express a sort of fiendish delight. Now you run the gauntlet of a legion of small and mis-

chievous boys, who are sure to yell, 'Lem me ride!' To which a negative answer is sure to call down on your devoted head a shower of snowballs. Thereupon your horse takes fright, and for some time you find it difficult to steer clear of lamp posts, sidewalks and front yards. But then there is such a novelty about it. True, you can't find time to say one word to the companion at your side, your attention being wholly engrossed in the management of your headstrong horse. Your arms have a dislocated sort of feeling consequent upon holding your horse in; your fingers tingle with the cold, and your face seems to have been flayed with the wind. Yet you experience a hundred happy exhilarating sensations that make a good sleighride, especially to a sedentary person, one of the most delightful experiences of the season."

What boy has not delighted in hitching a ride on a sleigh or bobsled? Slow-moving vehicles afforded no special cause for alarm but when sleighs were whirling down the street real danger might suddenly present itself. "Some of our citizens have been enjoying the snow", declared the Council Bluffs *Bugle* of January 25, 1866. "The bells have been ringing out their merry music, and the horses passing up and down the streets at a two-forty speed."

The problem of boys catching rides on fast-moving sleighs apparently caused considerable concern in many towns. "Our worthy city marshal", declared the *Fort Dodge Messenger* on January 13, 1887, "has undertaken the rather arduous duty of keeping the small boys of the city from risking their lives daily by 'bobbing.' This practice of catching and stealing rides on moving bobsleds has become a decided nuisance to all drivers of teams besides endangering the personal safety of the small boys, and the effort to choke it out will be appreciated, — not by the boys, however." Despite such precautions, there was a serious accident in the neighborhood of Duncombe in February, 1891. It was the result of foolishness. "A number of small school boys climbed upon a passing sled. The driver in order to prevent their getting off started his team at such a rate as to lose control of them". In McGregor the boys used to catch rides on farmers' bobsleds coming in from the country with freshly butchered frozen hogs. These boys enjoyed more than the sleigh ride, for they carried sharp knives with which they cut off the frozen pig tails, roasted them over a roaring fire, and ate them.

Dances were frequently made readily accessible by the trusty sleigh. In 1857 some of the younger set in Hamilton County drove a four-horse sleigh

from Saratoga to Rose Grove for a Christmas Eve dance. Near Kamrar they were set upon by a pack of a hundred prairie wolves but reached Rose Grove in safety. They danced until midnight when their landlord served them a meal consisting of deer, elk, and buffalo meat, corn bread baked on an iron griddle, fried cakes, and pumpkin pie. After doing it ample justice the merry party danced until morning when they ate their breakfast and started for home.

Early in February, 1873, a large party of Clinton ladies and gentlemen took a "jolly" sleigh ride to Camanche where they had an excellent supper at Anthony's and a dance in the hall. The gay and festive party continued throughout the night and "well into the morning".

In 1864 the sleigh ride of the season for McGregorites was made to the farm house of General and Mrs. Bigelow. Several four-horse omnibus sleighs as well as a number of vehicles of "less horse power" carried the party of seventy to their destination where Williams' (colored) Band provided music for the gay revelers. The supper was all that could be desired, the music good, the party lively. According to one account: "The General's 'contraband' served the party admirably, happiness was unalloyed; the expedition returned at 6 in the morning with a unanimous vote

that no one will ever lack for pleasure who goes to Bigelows."

It was not merely the McGregor young folks who took advantage of this popular winter sport. In mid-December of 1863 a party of old settlers enjoyed a sleigh ride to Andy Teet's Hotel where a ball was held. A week later another party of "old folks" took an eight-mile bob trip out to the home of Reuben Noble. They were greeted as warmly as though of "the same blood and not made up of different nativities and adverse political opinions", the editor of the *North Iowa Times* asserted. "A good thorough warming by an old-fashioned *fire-place*, the first that we remember to have seen for the last ten years, though the most comfortable and healthy *stove* that was ever in a house — a universal wetting of the lips with the finest native wines, lots of good words and holiday greetings, the dining hall was cleared of furniture, the Pleasant Ridge (Dickens') Band was announced, the 'previous question' was moved, and 'first four right and left' started the dance. About a thousand young ladies of McGregor, attended by a dozen young gentlemen, all drawn in a Four Horse Omnibus Sleigh, arrived at 12 o'clock and joined in the ceremonies. After eating an Oyster and Quail supper, we had more dancing and any amount of happiness, not the least of

which was the gratification of hearing the host sing the old song of 'Twenty Years Ago,' and many other excellent ones, accompanied on the piano by his charming daughter. Take it altogether it was a pretty lively house and party from 8 until 2 wasn't it, Reuben?"

Sometimes the cold weather discouraged even the most ardent sleigh riders. On January 1, 1863, the *Anamosa Eureka* declared that the New Year's dance at the Fisher House had been postponed because of the "terrible cold" but assured its readers it would be put on the following week no matter if it was cold enough to "freeze the horns off a Siberian reindeer or the tears from a Greenland iceberg."

Cold weather could not deter between seventy and one hundred members of the Congregational Sunday School from setting out for Mrs. A. D. Higgins's mansion in Cass Township in sundry cutters and sleds under the inspiring music of sleighbells. "The drive up was pretty cold business as the wind was keen and cutting, but all arrived in due time, and found hot fires ready antidotes to aching fingers and tingling noses", the *Anamosa Eureka* reported on January 15, 1874. A potluck dinner did much to satisfy "ravenous appetites" after which Mrs. Higgins sat down at the organ and played "Tramp, tramp,"

"Captain Jinks," "The Little German Band," and other popular airs while all gathered round and sang. "An hour or so was spent in various amusements and at nine o'clock the sleighs and sleds were brought out, and the guests bade Mrs. Higgins, whose pleasant home gives so much evidence of taste and culture, a cheery good-night and away they went in the jolliest good humor possible. The ride home was very comfortable indeed, the wind being to the rearward. Before ten o'clock the younger portion of the sleighing party had been distributed and tired little bodies were no doubt soon at rest in the home nest, and juvenile fancies wandering in a white-robed and starlit dream-land of perpetual sleigh-riding."

Far more romantic was the "omnibus sleigh-ride" taken by a party of Dubuque men and women in January, 1861. The sleigh was filled to overflowing with "a choice lot of beautiful women and a fair sprinkling of modest damsels, whose charms have not been diminished by the tightening of a tongue-tied knot". According to one of the company, "When coming down hill in the face of the blinding, driving storm the driver either in intentional mischief or otherwise, drove off from the road, and while going at a dog trot speed, easily, gently over we all went, landing harmless in the feathery drift.

“With twenty heads down in the snow in close juxtaposition, and double that number of finely rounded points extending starwards and waving in the breeze, didn't we present a picture for an artist? Such a chaos of hoops, gaiters, scalloped skirts, unheard of embroideries, etc., were never seen before. The group looked like some animated bouquet of gigantic proportions and most exquisite beauty, as they all lay struggling there in the gloom.” After contemplating the “novel situation a sufficient length of time” the sleigh was righted, the box and seats put in place, all piled in and proceeded on their way without further adventure worthy of notice “save the usual amount of toll and other extras, in such cases made and provided” as the girls were “properly distributed” to their several homes, all feeling that capsizing into a snow-drift on a stormy night “is a treat not to be enjoyed every day or soon forgotten.”

Difficulties and dangers could be encountered in the course of a pleasant sleigh ride. Late in January of 1867 snow to the depth of twelve or fourteen inches fell in the vicinity of Oskaloosa. Since sleighing was excellent where the roads were broken, two sled loads of Oskaloosans determined to go to Kirksville, some sixteen miles away. “KIRKVILLE”, observed the editor of the *Oskaloosa Herald* on January 31, 1867, “is a nice

little town, but most awful hard to find when hill and dale are covered with snow, as the two sled-loads of lads and lassies who started in search of it on Tuesday evening will testify. One load after a long ride of about four hours, losing the road several times, arrived at their destination; the other, after swamping the horses in a ditch, sticking in snow-drifts, losing the roads innumerable times, letting down fences, driving across lots, found themselves, after five hours driving, 12 miles from Kirkville, and 3 from Eddyville, towards the latter they bent their way, and after partaking of a good supper at the Slemmons' House, returned home, satisfied that it is easy to get lost upon an Iowa prairie. We will not mention names. P. S. 'Ye local' took supper at Eddyville Tuesday night."

In Webster County a number of young people took a pleasant sleigh ride on the evening of January 30, 1891. Four horses were hitched to a pair of bobsleds and as they jogged along the jolly youngsters "tried to scare all the dogs" out of Clay Township. The young folks of Elkhorn attended the revival meeting at Kalo in sleighs.

John Lang, a pioneer of Davis County, looked back with pleasure to his sleigh-riding experiences. "It was common", Lang declared, "to hitch up a team to the sled and the whole family go to a

neighbor's to spend the evening in visiting and eating apples or popcorn. The women would take their knitting along. Sometimes they would stay all night. They always had plenty of grub to divide, of the best. Corn bread, home grown buckwheat, flap-jacks as big as the skillet, full size of the griddle, spread with country butter or sausage gravy, and sweetened with molasses, was good enough. One lady said she never liked buckwheat cakes, but I noticed that she kept on until she had eaten six or eight. Those were the days when our amusements were blackman, town-ball, dare-base, drop the handkerchief, apple peelings, singing schools and ciphering matches."

But sleigh riding ultimately gave way to the first soft breezes of spring. Sometimes the sport ended abruptly; at other times it died off slowly. On February 3, 1887, the Fort Dodge *Messenger* noted that the "small portion of snow deposited by the late storm proved sufficient to revive the expiring sleighing and the merry jingle of the bells is again audible." Two weeks later this same editor observed that the "backbone of winter" was doubtless broken and spring would prove a "welcome change". "The snow is leaving us fast", an Otho dispatch reported, "and soon we will be obliged to get around on wheels."

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN