

An Iowa Anecdote

CROSSING THE MISSISSIPPI

Michael Henely and his young wife, Mary Jane Kirkley Henely, with their small son, Martin, under two years of age, pioneered westward from Marietta, Ohio, in the winter of 1851-52. Quite typically they brought their possessions in a covered wagon. With others venturing their fortunes in the new State of Iowa, they were obliged to stop on the east bank of the Mississippi River at Savanna, Illinois where they awaited the freezing of the Father of Waters before they could cross to Sabula, in Iowa. Meanwhile, they found accommodations at the hotel and impatiently observed the weather, hoping for a cold snap. Finally the temperature dropped and the ice in the river froze to a thickness guaranteed by the local dwellers to be perfectly safe for the transportation of wagons and people.

The story of that crossing has become as much of a legend in the Henely family as that of Eliza's escape over the ice in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Mary Jane enjoyed relating the adventure to her children and grandchildren.

"While the ice was pronounced safe for us to

travel across it," she used to say, "Michael was not willing that the baby and I should accompany him until he had himself tested it.

"He gave me the money belt in which our funds were being carried and asked me to put it on. He said that if anything should happen to him while making the crossing we would not be left without means to return to the old home.

"Obediently I put on the money belt. I wrapped the baby in my prized Broché shawl that had been my mother's, Margaret Kirkley's. The weather was now quite cold but with the baby snugly wrapped I carried him in my arms to where our wagon was waiting for the trip. Michael mounted to the seat and while he did so I quietly placed the baby in the back of the wagon and jumped in myself. We were more than halfway across the river when Michael discovered that we were there with him. He was very angry at first to think I had done this, but we were nearer the Iowa side so we continued on our way arriving safely — a united family. Of course I was forgiven for what I had done, risking my life and the baby's life, as he described it.

"But what would you have done? It would no doubt have been the same thing I did.

"Finally, I convinced my husband that I was not willing to be left out of whatever fate awaited

him, that I preferred we should live or die together. I have never been sorry that I went as an unexpected and an unwanted passenger."

Safely across the ice the little family took up land in Jones County, not far from Monticello, where they established a happy home. While Michael Henely might have chosen more fertile farm land, he followed the policy of the settlers of those days and selected a homestead with both wood and water on it.

Four sons grew up in the Henely home — Martin, William, Edmund, and Eugene. For many years, Eugene's wife, Louise Miller Henely, has been the proud possessor of the Broché shawl. Eventually it will belong to Margaret Kirkley Henely Black, the great granddaughter of the original owner, Margaret Kirkley, who will cherish the family heirloom.

LOUISE MILLER HENELY