

Roving Correspondents

The year 1836 marks the beginning of a new era in the chronicling of Iowa history—the founding of the first newspaper in Iowa—the *Du Buque Visitor* at Dubuque. Prior to this date the only records kept were by such explorers and travelers as Joliet and Marquette, Jonathan Carver, Lewis and Clark, Beltrami, and Stephen Watts Kearny, and the daily journals of military outposts like Fort Edwards, Fort Armstrong, and Fort Crawford.

Most of these records were extremely fragmentary. Since permanent settlement did not begin until June 1, 1833, one reads in them largely about the weather, flowers and fauna, fish and game, Indian tribes, the geological conformation of the country, the soil and mineral resources, the importance of the fur trade, and the possibilities of lumbering.

With the exception of Kearny, all of the individual recorders had limited experience in Iowa, both as to length of time and distance traversed within the borders of our present-day Hawkeye State. Carver, for example, saw only the extreme northeastern border along the Mississippi for a few days, while Lewis and Clark saw only the

western two-thirds along the Missouri slope for the space of about six weeks during the same season of the year. Most of these chroniclers had little in the way of previous writing with which to prepare them for the region they were about to traverse. Kearny, in contrast, traveled along both the Mississippi and Missouri, keeping a record of what he did and saw. In addition, he visited widely scattered sections of Iowaland, probably seeing and riding through half of the present-day counties of Iowa.

All this recording, while extremely important in telling the story of Iowa, is of little consequence when compared with the record kept by the 222 newspapers established in Iowa prior to the Civil War, 104 of which were still being printed in 1860. These newspapers recorded the growth of the region, generally mentioned the state of the weather and the stage of the river, and were extremely important not only in chronicling but in encouraging and stimulating growth.

Some idea of the magnitude of the work of these newspapers can be seen in reading the very general account of Henry C. Kelly on Northern Iowa in this issue of *THE PALIMPSEST*. It should be pointed out that these are not merely superficial observations but are the result of a series of letters previously published, describing approximately one-third of the present-day Iowa counties in

great detail—their communities, agricultural development and industrial growth, churches, schools, the spread of stagecoach and railroad routes, and the character of the people inhabiting each district.

Measured in terms of number of words written, it is probably safe to say that Mr. Kelly wrote more specifically about Iowa than did all the chroniclers of the French and Spanish period (1673–1803) combined, and it is altogether possible that several of the more important writers in the American period could be added before their total contributions equaled the output of the versatile and observant Mr. Kelly. When one considers that his letters were written in the period when Iowa was undergoing rapid settlement, the above fact becomes even more significant.

The writings of Mr. Kelly were not read by merely an Iowa audience. Many papers were sent east and south and were read and often reprinted in papers far removed from the Hawkeye State. As a result, these letters were likely to cause a healthy flow of immigrants to, as well as within, Iowa.

The role of the roving newspaper correspondents was both subtle and certain in the development of the Hawkeye State. Their record, combined with the letters sent in to editors by such enthusiasts as John Plumbe, Jr., form an impor-

tant contribution to the history of Iowa. Indeed, much of the local history in the average newspaper, and frequently the most accurate part of it, is to be found in the columns of the veteran roving reporters and casual letter writers whose contributions appeared in the Iowa Press a century ago.

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