

## Pioneer Iowa in Beadle Fiction

If you are going to enjoy dime novels, you have to get into a dime-novel frame of mind. For example, if you take up one of Oll Coomes' tales with a pioneer Iowa setting, you will do well to lay aside prosaic ideas of clearing and farming, and take the plunge into romantic adventure with Hawkeye Harry. Here is a little incident in this intrepid pioneer's life which may help you take that plunge.

To avoid a wide *detour* he resolved to cross a deep chasm known among the hunters and trappers as the Black Gorge. . . . In a moment he stood upon its brink. . . . His attention was arrested by what he had never noticed before. A tree had been uprooted and was lying across the abyss, spanning it from cliff to cliff. At this point the gorge was some fifty feet deep and about thirty in width. . . . Here seemed to Harry a streak of luck, for the rude bridge would enable him to cross without going further out of the way.

Arranging his rifle firmly at his back so that he could use both arms freely in maintaining an easy balance in crossing the log, he stepped upon it and began moving slowly across. The moon shone full on him and far down into the black mouth of the gorge. . . . With firm step he felt his way onward, and soon reached the foliage of the elm that hung down over the log. This he carefully pushed aside, and passed beyond.



But at that instant he came to a sudden halt. A low cry escaped his lips. There, before him, on the center of the log, over the fearful depths of the abyss, he found himself face to face with a powerful Indian warrior — a deadly foe!

Retreat was impossible for either of the two natural enemies. . . . They stood glaring at each other, motionless as statues — like maddened beasts preparing to leap.

. . . . Quick as a flash of lightning Harry permitted his feet to slip apart, and dropped himself astride of the log, locking his feet on the under side of the log. No sooner had he done this than the savage warrior followed his example and dropped himself astride of the log.

Without waiting to draw his knife, Hawkeye Harry drove his clenched fist into the red-skin's face with such force as to make him yell with pain and rage, as he drew his knife and made a desperate pass at his young adversary; but he had reckoned without his host. With great presence of mind, Harry caught the descending arm with his left hand, while with his right, he dealt the savage a blow in the stomach that caused him to drop his knife in the abyss; but, quick as lightning, he reached forward and they grasped each other in a deadly embrace.

The slender log swayed and creaked beneath their struggling forms. . . . To and fro they swayed — striking, struggling and writhing like serpents. Still they kept their legs clasped about the log like bands of steel, but at last they lost their equilibrium and turned completely over upon the log! Their situation was now indeed perilous. With their feet locking over the *top* of the log and their bodies dangling below, they struggled and fought on more desperately than before.

The savage succeeded in entwining his muscular arms around the form of our hero, and then made a desperate



effort to crush the life from the young body. But the youth had managed to seize the warrior by the scalp-lock, and was there-by enabled to thrust his head backward until the crown touched between the shoulders.

Half-strangled, the red-skin loosened his hold upon the youth's body, and becoming dizzy and faint, with a determined effort to drag the youth down into the abyss with him, he clutched the lad with both hands by the throat, as his feet slipped apart; but unable to maintain the hold upon the throat, with a wild despairing shriek, that echoed in prolonged wails through the gorge, the doomed wretch went whizzing down into the fearful abyss.

The young ranger had won the victory; he was free, but still hanging head downward over the black gulf. And now he realized his true peril, for he was far from being saved; his limbs were growing weak, and his head dizzy with the rush of blood to the brain.

Then he feels a vibrating shock of the log. Great heavens! It is produced by a footstep, and no doubt that of another Indian! He sees a dark form upon the log outlined against the sky; he fixed his glaring eyes upon it. Blessed sight! It was the form of Old Optic.

The next instant brave Harry was assisted from his awful position — saved!

"That war a ticklish place, Hawkeye," said the old trapper.

Eight of the ten Beadle novels with Iowa settings were written by Oll Coomes. Since Coomes spent his youth in Jasper County it is not remarkable that several of his stories involve the area between the Des Moines and the Chacauque or Skunk rivers.



In *The Boy Spy, or, The Young Avenger*, Fort Des Moines, at the fork of the Raccoon and Des Moines rivers, was often the goal of wild rides ahead of pursuing Sioux demons. Keith's Tavern, supposedly fifteen miles east of the fort on the emigrant road, was the scene of the theft of an important map, and on the divide between the Des Moines and Chacauque rivers occurred the desperate encounters between Frank Bell, the Boy Spy, and the twelve Indians he had vowed to scalp alive in retaliation for the massacre of his parents. Coomes located the village of the Sioux chief, Inkpadutah, the perpetrator of the Spirit Lake Massacre, only thirty miles northeast of Fort Des Moines!

*The Boy Spy* has the usual quota of incidents of outwitting and outfighting the Indians. Frank Bell also rescued the sixteen-year-old Lillian Vaughan, "her sweet fair face blanched with fear and her dark-blue eyes turned upon her companion, half-despairing, half-hopeful," and unmasked and killed the arch-villain, Jubal Wolfgang. In numerous adventures he had the assistance of his white horse, Specter, which showed the same kind of devotion to his master that Silver exhibits toward the "resourceful and masked rider of the plains." Hi, Ho, Specter!

This novel has, also, complications of buried treasure, a mysterious raft-cabin in the middle of



Crystal Lake, and a magic canoe that plied between the cabin and the shore without an occupant.

*The Boy Chief; or, The Doomed Twenty* is a sequel to *The Boy Spy*. Frank Bell appears again as one of the two heroes. The other is Guy Meredith, who lived with his mother near Prairie Post. This settlement, says the author, was twenty-five miles east of Fort Des Moines and had been settled by St. Louisans, who had come up the Missouri to St. Joseph and then across country to Prairie Post.

When Guy Meredith returned home one evening to find twenty Indians howling around his burned cabin, he vowed to kill and scalp every one of the twenty. It took him the whole hundred pages of the novel to accomplish his vow, and it is a bloody business; but neither he nor the reader ever falters.

Frank Bell, accused of a murder he did not commit, disguised himself as the Indian Boy Chief of the Arapahoes. His courtship of the fair Lillian progressed satisfactorily despite the disguise. Guy Meredith, between scalplings, fell in love with an Indian maiden, Red Rose, who, the reader is relieved to learn in due time, is the long-lost sister of Frank Bell.

*Thornpath the Trailer; or, The Perils of the Prairie* states in its first sentence: "Our story



opens in the year 1820 at a point on the Des Moines River some thirty miles below the mouth of the Raccoon." Some of the action takes place in and near the Post, which the author describes as a small settlement some thirty miles east of Fort Des Moines. There is something wrong here, as Fort Des Moines was not established until 1843. But with dozens of Indians to be shot, drowned, or thrown out of trees into the clutches of bears, and always to be "sculped," with a maiden of some eighteen summers to be repeatedly rescued from the Sioux, with the burning of the Post to be avenged, with the Indian Red Hand to be exposed as the renegade Carl Oakley in disguise, there is little wonder that Mr. Coomes was not too meticulous about dates.

The fourth of the Iowa dime novels to deal with the part of Iowa just east of Fort Des Moines is *Antelope Abe; or, The Forest Bride*, by "Will Dexter," apparently a pen name used by Oll Coomes. The author tells an interesting tale in the pattern by this time familiar. His hero, Antelope Abe, is fearless and light-hearted. He enjoins the pursuing savages thus: "Come on, ye pack o' maw-mouthed imps! Come on, and I'll give ye all a free check to the brimstone-pit, bearin' the ginu-wine stamp of Antelope Abe — jist so!"

And here is one of his methods of attack:

Antelope Abe's head shot quickly downward toward



the earth, and scarcely touching his hands upon the ground, he turned a complete hand-spring with the quickness of a flash, and, as his heels whirled through the air, he planted them with all the force he could summon, directly in the face of the advancing outlaw, who was sent half-unconscious to the earth.

In *Hawkeye Harry, The Young Trapper Ranger*, Coomes set his stage in northwestern Iowa. Its hero, Harry Houston, with whom our reader is already familiar from the exciting episode which opens this sketch, lived with Old Optic "in a little valley on the banks of a purling stream that found its way into the crystal waters of Lake Boyer." The action of the story took place in the area between the Boyer and Raccoon rivers. Here Harry rescued Nora Gardette, a maiden "of exquisite loveliness," from Rat Rangle's gang of outlaws, and later had one thrilling encounter after another with Sioux Indians as he and Nora tried to escape in a canoe on the Boyer River. The denouement, a tremendous climax, occurs at the Sioux encampment near Okoboji. There Harry and Old Optic and the United States dragoons from Fort Des Moines overcome the Sioux warriors and restore the white prisoners to the arms of lovers and parents.

The date was sometime after the Spirit Lake Massacre, which occurred in 1857, for one character dates his hatred of Indians from that event.



The story of *Old Bald Head; or, Red Star, The Spirit of the Lake* opens with definite information as to time and place. "Time: a summer night in the year 1838. Place: the edge of a forest skirting Storm Lake, a body of water in the then territory of northwestern Iowa."

A few miles south of the lake, said Coomes, lay Pleasant Prairie, a settlement of six families; and a mile and a half north, the hostile Sioux Indians, under their aged chief, Sidomindotah, had their village. Indian Creek and Bear Creek joined to form Death Channel, so called from the depth and blackness of its waters and the dense growth of elms and vines that overhung it. It emptied into Storm Lake, and its dark channel offered wonderful opportunities for ambushing enemies.

Coomes used a whole bagful of mysteries in this story. From an island in the center of the lake there comes on some nights Red Star, the Spirit of the Lake. A hunter, standing guard, sees him in this fashion:

He beheld the figure of a man with enormous feet walking upon the surface of the lake, with long shuffling strides. Great wings of fire reached out from each shoulder, casting a lurid glare over the waters and relieving the outlines of the flying form from the fog and the gloom. . . . In his hand he clutched a tomahawk, while at his back was hung a rifle by means of a strap passing over his shoulder.



The hunter awakened his two friends. One of them, Loamiah Henry Symbro, from Kentucky, upon hearing about the Spirit earlier, had remarked:

"Ha! Ha! Ha! That's just as tough a yarn as I've ever heard. The ridiculous idea of a man walking on the surface of the water ort to be laughed out of existence. Sich a thing has never been did since the time Christ walked on the sea and it's all bosh to say so."

But as he awoke and saw the flaming figure, he conceded in awe, "By the amphibious Jehokeys! If that isn't the Spirit of the Lake, I'll be shot!"

The reader eventually learns that Red Star was really Arthur Clenham, who, after his wife was killed by Indians, entered upon a career of revenge. He lived in a cave on a small island in Storm Lake, and had discovered in some caverns or vaults on the shore of the lake "relics of that prehistoric race, the ancient Mound-builders." Among the artifacts were "two peculiarly curious tiny cedar-wood canoes. These marine shoes — for such Clenham called them — were so constructed that, in moving one forward, the other could not recoil, and with much practice and at the risk of innumerable duckings, he finally became so skilled in their use, that he found no difficulty in navigating the waters at pleasure."

Unfortunately the construction of these marvelous water-shoes is not explained in greater detail.



What a wonderful sport water-walking could be if this secret of the Mound builders had been revealed!

The reader also learns (and if he is an experienced dime-novel reader, not to his surprise) that Arthur Clenham's beautiful wife had not really been killed by the Indians, but only stunned, and that he found her at last safe and sound at Pleasant Prairie. And here we leave her, "clasped to the breast of her husband."

*Silent Shot, The Slayer* differs from the other Oll Coomes stories in several respects. The hero used bow and arrow; hence his soubriquet. He was always accompanied by a large, sleek "grayhound," inappropriately named Harmony. The story opens on the cliffs overlooking the Missouri at Council Bluffs and the various incidents occur on the prairies east of the Missouri and in the timber lands bordering the Nishnabotna River.

But again there were the Sioux, with their treacherous ways; and again there was the band of border outlaws, with their leader pretending to be a friend of the settlers. The robbers lived at Hunters' Lodge, a few miles from Morris settlement, according to the author. A secret cavern behind the Lodge justifies the second title of the book.

The story of *Old Kyle, The Trailer, or, The Renegade of the Delawares*, by Henry J. Thomas,



begins with the hero standing on the banks of the Rattlesnake River. This Iowa river, Thomas says, had its "headwaters away up in the Rocky Mountains," and "finally debouched into the Mississippi." The reader begins there to doubt the author's knowledge of Iowa. And his Delawares were only remotely associated with Iowa; A. R. Fulton does, however, record the massacre of twenty-three Delawares by the Sioux on the banks of the Raccoon.

Thomas tells a good tale of adventure on the banks of the Rattlesnake. Old Kyle is a lusty and clever scout, and thanks to him the hunters who were lost are found; and Adrian Woodland, who had been kidnapped from her home in Illinois, is restored to her father's arms and the kidnapper meets his well-deserved fate.

And how Thomas could write! Old Kyle found Adrian asleep in a canoe.

Never in all his wanderings had he encountered what seemed to him such form and features of marvelous beauty. As she lay with the side of her face upon her arm, the pink tint of the sea-shell was upon the well-rounded cheek, and the penciled eyebrows were as if drawn in ink. A mass of luxuriant dark hair rippled and rolled away in a negligent manner over the symmetrical shoulders, while the faint, regular breathing betokened not death, but rosy health.

And at the end of the book occur these moving



words. "We draw the veil over the meeting between Adrian Woodland and her parents. Our feeble pen cannot paint the touching picture, and we dismiss it with the simple tear of sympathy" — the only simple thing in the novel, the reader feels.

That the scene of *The Man-Hunter; or, The Counterfeiters of the Border* was in Iowa we know only because Maro O. Rolfe tells us so in the first sentences. "Iowa. Then a territory, A. D. 1835 — an epoch of border-crime and ruffianism."

This story has everything, except Indians. The only Indian was Lunita, an agent of the counterfeiters. These lawbreakers operated in a tavern a mile away from the Mississippi, and in one of the upstairs rooms of the same tavern a woman had been chained for sixteen years — chained, believe it or not.

Mori, the Man Hunter, had been set on the trail of the counterfeiters by the Vigilantes, and was threatening their safety. The worst of the villains, Keno Taine, threatened to expose the best of the gang, Jules De Kay, unless Jules would give him daughter Evie in marriage. Jules protested time and again, and Evie protested time and again, but at last Evie nobly decided to sacrifice herself. Said Evie to Papa Jules:

"I told you, last night, that to save your life, — to save you from the Vigilantes and from the rope — I would become the wife of Keno Taine. I loathe and abhor Keno



Taine — he is a fiend incarnate! I would rather go to my grave than make the promises that will bind me to such a creature for life; . . . but I will marry Keno Taine and you may live.”

She stood up firmly — speaking evenly and calmly as though she were not talking of a step that would make her life a shade darker than the death of the most hopelessly depraved, sin-laden, unrepentant villain that ever trod the earth.

From that awful fate she was saved, thank goodness, by her long-lost mother, who gets unchained in the nick of time. With a conflict and a denouement of such dimensions, the reader never misses the Indians.

One of the most interesting novels in the collection is *The Dumb Spy*, a book of twenty-four pages in quarto size by Oll Coomes. The text begins under a large woodcut of a prairie hunter on page one.

The year of the story is 1842. It centers about a group of Kentuckians who had come up into Iowa to stake claims. They hoped to get land along the Des Moines River in the Black Hawk Reserve. Since that land would not be transferred from the Sac and Fox Indians until the next May, they had secured a private permit from Black Hawk (dead four years!) and had set up a camp and built a stockade on the bank of the Des Moines River. They had two guides, Noisy Nat and Wild Dick, and were later joined by a



celebrated scout and Indian fighter, Old Hurricane.

A few miles south of their camp was the section known as the "Dispute," that strip of country claimed by both the State of Missouri and the Territory of Iowa. It had become "one of the most central posts for outlaws, river pirates and robbers west of the Mississippi." The outlaws naturally resented any settlements of law-abiding men; and one gang, led by Reckless Ralph, tries to drive the Kentuckians out of the Territory.

The Indians, too, were particularly irascible in this area because of their resentment at Black Hawk's treaty with the government; and despite his plea for toleration and peace, they made repeated attacks on the Kentuckians. Old Hurricane's particular enemy was a big Indian, called Big Foot, and their desperate fights provide not only excitement but also amusement for the reader.

All these warring elements furnish plenty of combat, which culminates in a battle at the stockade, in which the robbers employ a cannon mounted on a large flatboat. But again, as always in the Beadle books, the villains are outwitted. And at the end the Kentuckians, with wives and sweethearts restored, sail in triumph on the enemy's flatboat down the Des Moines and the Mississippi to St. Louis.



Coomes does not miss any chances in this book. Besides the elements mentioned, it has a situation created by identical twins — one, Wild Dick, with the settlers, and the other, the Dumb Spy, ostensibly in the service of Reckless Ralph. It has, too, a mystery killer, the "Demon of the Des Moines." And it has a thrilling tribute to the United States flag, raised over the stockade at a time of attack by the Indians. The girls sing "Oh, say can you see" as Old Hurricane shouts, "By the gods of Olympus, yonder flag must not be disgraced, . . . whoop! whoop! hurrah, ye screechin' fiends, come on — right into the jaws of death —."

Since Coomes lived in Iowa, we might expect from him some good descriptions of what Old Optic called the "perairy." But instead of such rich and vivid descriptions as those in Plumbe's *Sketches of Iowa and Wisconsin*, Coomes offers in his Beadle novels only old clichés and conventional phrases.

Nor is there any great skill in characterization. The exact age, and the colors of eyes and hair are always given, and the heroes are "perfectly developed in all the attributes of manhood," or "possessed of muscular development and strength equaled by few men upon the border." But they remain types, without much real individuality.

Some attention is paid to costume. Nearly all the men wear buckskin suits and moccasins.



Hawkeye Harry wears a cap made of the skin of a hawk, and adorned with the wings of the bird. Old Hurricane wears a wolfskin cap. Silent Shot, the Slayer, wears a blue velveteen hunting shirt, which the artist makes red on the cover. The practical reader wonders how velveteen would wear on the prairies.

The heroines all have ringlets, even before the invention of permanents, and whether blond or brunette they all seem much alike. All are brave and loyal to parents and lovers. They have delicate feelings and are easily shocked. If it is necessary to kill or scalp an Indian in the presence of one of these girls, the scalper always apologizes. The feminine reader would like to know how these pioneer girls dressed, but she never learns.

There is another type of woman in some of these novels, one with more vigor and more personality. She is an older woman, a wronged wife or mother, who is on the prairie to rescue a daughter from the Indians, or to get revenge. She wears buckskin, often disguises herself as a man, lives in a cavern or on an island, and in one instance in a cave under a small stream with a trap door in the bed of the stream.

The conventional comedy characters of early American literature crop up in some of the novels. *Silent Shot, The Slayer* has Professor Fitz Henry Stebbins, from the University of Vermont. He



has written a book called *The American Aborigines: Their Place in Civilization*. His costume for travel in Iowa consists of white linen pants and vest, a swallow-tail coat of blue cloth with a double row of brass buttons upon each side in front, and a jaunty little lacquered straw hat. The "aborigines" have more fun from his sojourn in Iowa than does the professor.

In *The Man-Hunter* appears another character attired in the same kind of swallow-tail coat, "with pants very small as to the legs, checked in large black and brick-colored plaids." A small skull-cap sits on the head of this "real, genuine, down-east Yankee," Levi Eli Elnathan Gershaman.

One of the best of the humorous characters is Toamiah Symbro in *Old Bald Head*. He brags of his prowess in Indian warfare; but in an actual encounter with a savage he always runs. In one episode, an Indian chases him all one day and a night and part of another day, both men falling down occasionally and resting. At last the Indian in a sudden rush catapults over Toamiah into the swamp and gets stuck in the mud. Another great victory for Toamiah.

The sophisticated reader may not find these artificial comic elements very funny, but he will get many chuckles out of the racy speech of the old hunters and the skillfully devised interplay of



incidents. And, of course, the melodramatic elements are always entertaining and amusing.

How the Beadle authors loved mysteries! And how clever their imaginations were in devising secret hiding places, strange visions, and unusual death-dealing devices! *The Boy Spy* and *Old Kyle* have chapters headed "Mysterious Disappearance." *Hawkeye Harry* has a chapter called "More Mysteries," and *Old Bald Head* reaches the ultimate in its chapter on "Mysterious Mysteries." How can an author be more mysteriously mysterious than that?

In all the novels except *The Man-Hunter* a struggle between the Indians and the whites provides the basic conflict. There is no doubt that scant justice is done to the Indian situation in Iowa. The number of Indians in the area is certainly exaggerated as are their treachery and hostility to the settlers. Most early Iowa settlers never were involved in Indian fights, although these books give us the impression that they were continually holding on to their scalp locks.

Coomes occasionally employs a friendly Indian, and in *The Dumb Spy* he gives what is probably an accurate portrayal of the sentiments of Black Hawk. But on the whole, the reader realizes that the author's whole-hearted delight is in the copper-skinned varmint on the warpath with tomahawk swinging.



Despite their limitations of style and their inaccuracies, these novels are an interesting and important part of Iowa literature. The reader comes to regard Oll Coomes with gratitude and affection because of his interest in local settings and his obvious love for the pioneer aspects of Iowa. Even after eighty years, the novels are good reading for anyone who likes a tale of swift action with a dash of melodrama.

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