

Sioux City and the Frontier

[In 1866 Sioux City lay on the fringe of American settlement — a bustling outpost on the American frontier. Although the railroad did not reach Sioux City until 1871, a steady stream of steamboats was churning up the Big Muddy as far as Fort Benton making Sioux City an important outfitting and jumping-off point for the Upper Missouri. The Indian, the fur trader, and the soldier dominated most of Dakota Territory, but squatters were filtering into the eastern section. Nebraska was destined to be admitted into the Union in 1867, and settlers were rushing into that territory. Newspaper editors in eastern Iowa found their readers deeply interested in this new country which was just opening to settlement. The following two letters, printed in the *Dubuque Weekly-Herald* for May 23, and June 13, 1866, are typical of their efforts to provide subscribers with first-hand information about the fabulous land beyond the Missouri.

C. A. Reed, the author of these letters, was born in Platteville, Wisconsin, in 1841 and was brought to Dubuque by his parents in 1843. He graduated from Cornell College and the University of Michigan medical school. He served as surgeon with several Iowa regiments during the Civil War. In 1866 he was secretary and surgeon of the commission sent out to make treaties with the Indians on the Missouri. It is the early activities of this commission which he describes here. Reed later went into business in Dubuque as a member of the grocery firm of Stahlman and Reed. — THE EDITOR]

Sioux City, May 13, 1866.

After one week's travel by railway and stage-coach, (the latter mode of traveling I suppose you know consists in riding on good roads), with the privilege of walking and pushing the coach through all bad sloughs, which by the way are rather numerous in this country, we find ourselves safe and sound in Sioux City on the eastern bank of the Great Muddy, awaiting the arrival of the steamer which is to convey us with the other members of the "Northwestern Peace Commission" to our destination in the upper Indian country.

We are now near the northwestern boundaries of civilization. A short distance west of this point are located the lands of the Sioux Indians who are being transferred from their former reservations in Minnesota, and together with the Santees who have been held as prisoners of war at Rock Island, are being it is to be hoped permanently settled on the Niobrara, or Running Water River, in northern Nebraska. Directly north of this in the territory of Dakota is the reservation of the Yanctons. Below a distance of twenty-five miles are the Omaha lands, and recently the government has concluded to remove the Winnebagoes, who were formerly in Wisconsin, and more recently about four hundred miles above here on the river, and locate them a short distance below and opposite this point, thus making it in reality for years to come the very westernmost verge of civilization.

The City of Sioux is surrounded with a chain of hills, not unlike the bluffs which encircle our own city of Dubuque. The highest of these is about one mile above the town. From its summit there is a landscape view hardly excelled in picturesqueness, and extent, by any on this continent. Looking in a northwesterly direction we have a clear view of the Missouri river wending its tortuous course among the hills as far as the eye can reach, the valley covered with a dense forest of Cottonwood trees and varying in width from two

to three miles, still retaining all its natural beauty and grandeur, unmarred by the hand of progress and civilization. On the opposite slope and meeting among the hills as if for protection, can be seen the promising little town of Dakota City. Directly north is the valley of the Great Sioux River, which empties into the Missouri at this point and forms the boundary line between Iowa and Dakota Territory. To the south and east there is an almost unlimited view of one of Iowa's broadest prairies.

In a business point of view this is one of the best locations in the state. As the last point of any importance on the Missouri, and just below the mouth of the Great Sioux River, it naturally controls a large share of the trading interest of the upper country, and judging from the apparent enterprise of its citizens and its natural advantages of location we predict for Sioux City an important future.

The gold discoveries of Montana territory, seem to produce almost as much excitement here as do the petroleum discoveries upon our neighbors farther east.

Already this spring some thirty-five steamers have passed this point en route for the mountains, or as far in that direction as they can possibly navigate the river, all heavily laden with men and supplies, bound for this comparatively new field of golden wealth. There are also quite a large

number of trains starting across the country on the new overland route, via Niobrara River. — The largest train which starts from this point is under the control of Col. Sawyer[s], a gentleman of enterprise and long experience on this frontier. They will start about the 20th inst., and if ordinarily successful expects to make the trip in about ninety days. They go fully armed and in large enough force to resist any attack which may be made upon them by hostile Indians.

This place has for some time past been the headquarters of the "Military District of the Northwest," formerly under the command of Gen. Sully, but at present commanded by Col. Reeves of the 13th U. S. Infantry. I am informed, however, that the "headquarters" will soon be removed to Ft. Sully or some point further up the river. The volunteer troops which have been doing duty in this department are now being rapidly relieved and sent to their respective states to be mustered *out* of the service of Uncle Samuel and INTO the bosoms of their several families. The 13th Regulars will hereafter be on duty in this district. Several companies have already passed up the river for Ft. Sully and other points above. They are a fine body of men, commanded by an able corps of officers, and have won honor and distinction on many a bloody and well-fought field. May they find much pleasure in their isolated life.

C.A.R.

Fort Thompson, Dak., May 24.

The day after I wrote you from Sioux City, we learned that there would be considerable delay of the steamers which were to take us to the Indian country, one having been destroyed by fire together with a large share of the supplies and annuities, and the other delayed far beyond her time. It was decided that our better course would be to go as far as we could by land. According with this decision we went by stage as far as Yankton City, where we chartered trains for the remainder of our journey.

At Yankton, the capital city of Dakota territory, we met several old residents of Dubuque, among others Mr. Higby, who was formerly for a number of years connected with the "surveyor general's office."

We passed several days quite pleasantly at the agency of the Yankton Indians, of whom Mr. P. H. Conger, formerly of our city is agent. Here we had our first introduction to the Indians of the northwestern territories. He has under his charge about two thousand natives of the forest, and is cultivating for these, and with their assistance, a farm of about one thousand acres of land. They all seem contented and happy and well satisfied with the present administration of their affairs, and should the season prove favorable, they will produce grain enough this summer to supply themselves with bread for the coming year.

This is a delightful prairie country, with fine fertile soil and is well adapted to grazing purposes, but owing to its close proximity to the Rocky Mountains, there is very little rain during the summer season, which renders agriculture very uncertain. The country is almost entirely destitute of timber, the only source of supply being a small strip of cotton-wood along the banks of the Missouri and for a short distance along the margin of its tributary streams.

Most of the Indians we have seen thus far still retain many of their original habits of living and dress. With the exception of occasionally a chief they still inhabit the teepees (or lodges) of their forefathers, and regard any attempt at improvement in this direction as an innovation upon their ancient and inalienable rights. Occasionally you can see a chief arrayed in the full dress of his more civilized neighbors, but by far the larger number retain their original habit of dress.

The ladies too are loth to adopt any of the new fashions, which from time to time agitate the hearts, minds and purses of their more favored sisters of enlightened lands, and retain with commendable persistence the same style of dress adopted by their maternal ancestors in ages long since gone by. I have yet to see the first Indian woman who has adopted that much abused article of female apparel, the hoop skirt.

Few of the Indians of this country make any

attempt at speaking the English language. Although in some nations many can read and write their own language with ease and rapidity. At the agency of the Santa Sioux they have a large and prosperous school under the control of Rev. Mr. Williamson; their text books consist of a primary reader and spelling book, together with a hymn book, testament and dictionary, all printed in the Dakota language, and their agent informed me that when a part of their tribe were prisoners of war at Rock Island, they regularly received and sent more letters than the company of soldiers who were stationed at this fort.

The country about here abounds in game of all kinds, especially Buffalo, Elk, and Antelope in almost countless numbers. We have also passed several large colonies of Prairie dogs, but owing to the celerity of their movements we have been unable to succeed in killing any of them as yet.

The past winter was a very severe one in this latitude, with deep and continuous snows. This, in connection with the failure of the corn crops last summer, has produced a great deal of severe suffering among the Indians of this district. In many instances they have been compelled to kill and eat their horses, to keep from actual starvation. Notwithstanding this however, those with whom treaties were made last year, have in almost every instance preserved them inviolate. Had the same number of white men been placed in like

circumstances would they have acted in like good faith toward the government?

The next point which we will visit is Fort Sully, where we learn there are already some five thousand Indians, representatives of the various surrounding tribes, awaiting our arrival.

C.A.R.