

## Comment by the Editor

### THE REDISCOVERY OF IOWA

During the eleven days from the seventeenth to the twenty-seventh of June, there occurred one of the most significant episodes in the recent history of Iowa — the celebration of the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the exploration of the Mississippi River by Louis Joliet and Father Marquette. The central feature of the event was a replica voyage from the mouth of the Wisconsin River to Montrose — a continuous pageant lasting ten days, extending over a stage two hundred and fifty miles long, and witnessed by great numbers of people in audiences sometimes of thousands and again composed of only a few uncomprehending clam muckers. At the end of the trip the visit of the Frenchmen to an Indian village in Iowa two centuries and a half ago was re-enacted, and the commemoration of the coming of the first white men was made the occasion for observing other events in the early history of this Commonwealth.

The significance of the celebration, however, lies not so much in the length of the replica voyage, the size of the pageants, or the cost of the whole enterprise as it does in the spontaneity with which the project began and the wide-spread interest it

aroused. The whole affair was the work of the "history fans" of Iowa, inspired by Ben Hur Wilson of Mount Pleasant, who sells insurance for a living and studies local history for pleasure. Wherever the proposed celebration was mentioned the community eagerly responded. Before the end of May cities and clubs were vying for a place on the program, so that it became a problem to accommodate all who wished to share in the observance of Iowa's oldest anniversary. For every task there were ready and willing hands. Finances took care of themselves. No individual, city, society, organization, or group dominated the celebration: it was thoroughly democratic — the culmination of a common impulse.

Scarcely less impressive is the unusual interest in Iowa history that the event engendered. To many people who had never heard of Father Marquette or his picturesque companion, Sieur Joliet, those names are now familiar. For some, the "Black-Robe chief, the Prophet" in Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha* has become real and the poem has a new significance, for Father Marquette was that Black-Robe. Busy public officials, matter-of-fact business men, and energetic club women have haunted the libraries to learn of the adventurous Frenchmen who explored the Great Lakes and came into the Mississippi Valley seeking the Chinese Empire and a way to the sea. Newspapers have printed hundreds of columns concerning Joliet and Marquette and the recent reincarnation of those forgotten times. Far and wide

people of every station in life have learned of the discovery of Iowa, have caught a glimpse of the great valley as it was when the white men found it. The story has become common knowledge: the people of Iowa have come into a part of their rich heritage of the past.

The celebration of an event that occurred in Iowa two and a half centuries ago has done more than anything else to teach the people of this State that Iowa has a past — a past venerable in years and full of romance. The realm of Iowa history is broad and many fertile fields remain as yet uncultivated, their resources undeveloped and their potentiality unknown. There are more lessons to follow.

#### THE SPIRIT OF IOWA

Iowa has many distinctive characteristics — thrift, contentment, homogeneity, literacy, wealth — but one of the finest of all is Commonwealth consciousness. Perhaps it is the sum of them all. It is founded not upon climate or class or creed, but upon an all-pervading community of interests. Less than a year ago a cynical and superficial critic wrote that no one had yet been able “to rouse this people to a participation in any creative expression of the commonwealth” and concluded, “Seldom has a people been less interested in spiritual self-expression and more concerned with hog nutrition.” To such a libel the recent memorial celebration is the answer. It was the true expression of the spirit of Iowa — a

spontaneous, whole-hearted, unselfish response to a worthy enterprise.

In the years to come there will be many occasions for the recognition of important events, noble achievements, and glorious days in the history of this Commonwealth. Let there be similar demonstrations of the spirit of Iowa in the future. Let us maintain respect for our own institutions, let us write and read the story of our own State, let us compose our own music and create our own art, that the democracy of our fathers, the romance of our history, and the character of our prairies may live in the hearts of our people and find expression in the perpetuation of our native traits.

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