

Comment by the Editor

IOWA DIALECT

Literature is likely to be language in a formal mood. Perhaps it could be described as language in its parlor manners, if it is permissible to use that expression in its colloquial sense. At all events written language tends to become rigid, dignified, and nice. It loses the flexibility of pronunciation, the friendly familiarity, and the flavor of the dialect from which it sprang. Except for the terms of science and invention, which are taken bodily from the classical Greek or Latin, language grows from the speech of every-day life.

There was a time not long ago when dialect words were regarded as barbarisms to be studiously avoided, but now they are recognized as an essential part of the language of a people. Forsooth, nearly all new words that are particularly apt, picturesque, and full of the genius of idiom are dialectic. Dialect words have personality. Being linguistically youthful, they have the vitality and unabashed candor of children. They might be conceived as the second generation of slang grown highly respectable like prosperous tradespeople, and yet they have none of the stilted refinement of literary usage.

Every language was once a dialect, born in igno-

rance. And it has come to pass that the talk of the common people, even the illiterate, is the fountain of perpetual youth in any tongue. The speech of the southern negro is rich in distinctive dialect. Narrow interests, provincialism, new environment, and an atmosphere of easy democracy are the conditions in which dialects thrive. Under just such circumstances — so prevalent in pioneer Iowa — much of the “abusing of God’s patience and the King’s English” has probably occurred.

Life on the Mississippi in early times was especially conducive to the coining of dialect words. The lightering crews on the Des Moines Rapids spoke the lingo of Mark Twain’s rivermen, and probably contributed their share to river dialect. Who but a denizen of the levee would know what “filling and backing” meant, what a “sawyer” was, or understand the leadsmen’s cry of “mark twain”? A stevedore on the lighter-boats was called a “ratter”— perhaps because he carried grain in and out of the hold like a rat, just as the men who handle the baggage of tourists in Yellowstone Park are called “pack rats”. A workman who accepts less than union wages or takes the job of a striker is colloquially known as a “rat”, and the antagonism of the lighter loaders toward outsiders may have earned for them the epithet of “ratters”. Another peculiar expression of the lightermen was “gouger”, referring to the member of the boat crew who manned the sweep at the stern, because he gouged

his oar into the bed of the shallow stream and thus guided the craft between the rocks.

The settlers of Iowa came from little provincial communities at the ends of the earth—from the villages of New England and the farms of New York, from the tobacco plantations of Virginia and the blue-grass region of Kentucky, from the Red River of the North and various parts of the Old Country—and they brought their dialects along. Here they found fur traders, miners, and half-breeds, each group speaking a tongue of its own. And they also encountered a new environment and devised new modes of living—all of which stimulated the use of new words. No wonder the language of early Iowans was rich in dialect.

A careful study of dialect words, as Frank L. Mott suggests, would help to determine the geographical origins of the settlers of Iowa. Did they come predominantly from the South, as some suppose, or were they chiefly of New England stock? Examine their speech. The words “quern”, “reek”, “skirl”, “pibroch”, “scone”, “pemmican”, and “Pembina cart” would place the Selkirk Scotchmen of Jones County, though the story of their migration were lost.

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