

# The **PALIMPSEST**

SEPTEMBER 1923

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## THE PURPOSE OF THIS MAGAZINE

The PALIMPSEST, issued monthly by the State Historical Society of Iowa, is devoted to the dissemination of Iowa History. Supplementing the other publications of this Society, it aims to present the materials of Iowa History in a form that is attractive and a style that is popular in the best sense—to the end that the story of our Commonwealth may be more widely read and cherished.

BENJ. F. SHAMBAUGH

*Superintendent*

## THE MEANING OF PALIMPSESTS

In early times palimpsests were parchments or other materials from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the records of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

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# THE PALIMPSEST

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## The Early Iowans

The advisability of dividing the Territory of Wisconsin and erecting the Territory of Iowa was being discussed in Congress on June 5, 1838. Representative Charles Shepard of North Carolina, who seemed to be the leader of the opposition, was skeptical of the necessity for a new Territory and out of sympathy with the whole westward movement. Indeed, he was of the opinion that the desire for a new government west of the Mississippi came chiefly from those who wanted to speculate in the "fresh and rich" lands of the region, and from politicians who favored the creation of "a batch of new offices". But in any event, since Mr. Shepard felt constrained to give the project his most "zealous opposition", some of his statements may with propriety be quoted as reflecting views relative to the character of the early settlers of Iowa.

"But who are these", he asked, "that are dissatisfied with our legislation, and pray for the establish-



ment of a new Territory? Individuals who have left their own homes, and seized on the public land. As soon as Black Hawk and his warriors were driven from their hunting grounds, before the country was surveyed or a land office opened, these men pounced on the choicest spots, cut down the timber, built houses, and cultivated the soil as if it was their own property." He pointed out that, "without the authority of law, and in defiance of the Government, they have taken possession of what belongs to the whole nation". They were the people, he continued, "who require a governor and council, judges, and marshals, when every act of their lives is contrary to justice, and every petition which they make is an evidence of their guilt and violence. We, who are insulted, whose authority is trampled under foot, are asked for new favors and privileges; the makers and guardians of the law are approached by its open contemners, and begged to erect these modest gentlemen into a dignified Government. The gravity and insolence of this application would excite laughter, if the last ten years had not presented too many instances of a like spirit and character; individuals and masses of people in every part of this favored country begin to look beyond the law, to despise the constituted authorities, to consider their own feelings and passions as the standard of public duty, and too often men in high places have connived at their proceedings."

The manner in which new sovereignties were cre-



ated was also described. "These poachers take the public land, and humbly pray for the right of pre-emption; this yielded, they call the Government a step-mother, and demand various grants and immunities; then they force themselves into the Union, without complying with the act of Congress, and, reaching the climax of impudence, they boldly threaten to deprive the old States of all share in the national domain. But we are asked, what must be done? Twenty thousand people are living on the west side of the Mississippi, and the whole army of the United States could not drive them from their settlements."

Mr. Shepard was prophetic in his declaration that if "the Territory of Iowa be now established, it will soon become a State; if we now cross the Mississippi, under the bountiful patronage of this Government, the cupidity and enterprise of our people will carry the system still further, and ere long the Rocky Mountains will be scaled, and the valley of the Columbia be embraced in our dominion. This, then, is the time to pause, to gather the results of previous experience, and to consider the influence of this legislation on the character of the people and the durability of our institutions."

The establishment of the new Territory was also emphatically opposed by John C. Calhoun in the Senate, who, like Representative Shepard, saw the matter from the sectional point of view — more free States were not desired when the balance of power



was already against the South. Mr. Calhoun had heard that "the Ioway country had been already seized on by a lawless body of armed men, who had parcelled out the whole region, and had entered into written stipulations to stand by and protect each other, and who were actually exercising the rights of ownership and sovereignty over it — permitting none to settle without their leave, and exacting more for the license to settle, than the Government does for the land itself."

Henry Clay of Kentucky was of a similar opinion, based largely upon the field notes of the surveyors of the Black Hawk Purchase who stated that "the land was generally settled by armed intruders," and that their progress in the work was materially hindered "by the opposition and threats of this description of persons." Mr. Clay waxed sarcastic, declaring that in all probability there were members in both houses who were ready to pronounce that "a more honest, deserving set of men," did not exist: these men who openly flouted authority and "whose moral sense would be violated by an enforcement" of the law. As for himself he would like to know what "pretence had these lawless men for roving about the country and seizing by violence on the choicest spots of land?"

Mr. Clay desired that these lands be offered for sale and then if necessary the existing laws should be enforced. If need be he favored the removal of "these lawless intruders from the property they



have forcibly appropriated to their own use. What right had they to the public domain more than any other description of plunderers to the goods they may seize upon?" Since they "are honest, industrious men, who are unable to give the real value for the goods, they have taken this natural and harmless method of getting possession of them."

Not all in Congress, however, were of the same mind. The opposition to the creation of the Territory of Iowa and the passage of the Preëmption Act was easily overcome in both houses, the true character of the pioneers being too well known for much credence to be placed in the caustic remarks of southern statesmen.

One of the most ardent supporters of the Iowa settlers was Senator Lucius Lyon of Michigan who was familiar with conditions in the Iowa country and knew the workings of the claim associations in his own State. He was too well impressed with the character of the Iowa settlers "to believe, for a moment, that any person going there with the intention of becoming an actual settler in the country would be treated badly by those who had gone before him."

Senator Clement C. Clay of Alabama also took issue with those who maligned the settlers of the West. He severely criticized the Senator from Kentucky for picking out "some isolated cases of alleged resistance to the public officers, among the vast number of those who had settled on the public



domain". Indeed, he was of the opinion that if "a single individual, or even a dozen of them, in Iowa or Wisconsin, should manifest any hostility to the officers of the Government" it was insufficient reason for withholding the benefits of the preëmption bill from the "thousands of industrious and meritorious claimants".

The early settlers of Iowa were not only maligned by Congressmen — probably for political reasons — but also by others who had less opportunity of knowing their real character. Charles Augustus Murray, a noted English traveller, wrote in 1835 that Keokuk was "the lowest and most blackguard place" that he had visited. Its population was said to be composed chiefly of watermen who were "a coarse and ferocious caricature of the London bargemen, and their chief occupation" seemed to consist in "drinking, fighting, and gambling". It seems that one of the residents was rather proud of having shot an Indian, saying that he would "as soon shoot an Indian as a fox or an otter." The Englishman summed up the matter by remarking that this "murderer is called a Christian, and his victim a heathen". At Dubuque the barroom "was crowded with a parcel of blackguard noisy miners", from whom the most experienced blasphemers might have taken a lesson. It may be remarked, however, that the true character of a people can scarcely be studied with accuracy by viewing the denizens of public drinking places.

Drinking in those early days was not considered



an offense against society. As one writer put it, the "early settlers in Iowa, as well as in other Territories, drank a great deal of liquor. On the way to weddings, house raisings, and other gatherings, the bottle was passed liberally, and was used frequently during the ensuing program. With the advance of civilization the custom became less prevalent."

When the fierce heat of the summer had produced an abundance of malaria, ague, chills, and fever the life of the pioneer was indeed miserable. Cure-alls, however, were usually at hand. "Quinine was the standard medicine of the pioneer household for every known ailment, except rattle-snake bites, which called for whisky in generous doses. A family could get along very well without butter, wheat bread, sugar or tea, but whisky was as indispensable to house-keeping as corn meal, bacon, coffee, tobacco, and molasses."

It was said that upon one occasion an old settler ran out of this essential in the family commissary department, and walked ten miles to borrow a new supply from a good old deacon. But the deacon was short on "groceries" himself, as there had recently been a wedding in the family. He was "powerful sorry" that he could not fill his neighbor's jug—"but you see", said he, "I have only got a gallon left, and you know that won't any more than run our prayer meeting Wednesday night."

Perhaps a more trustworthy picture of the early pioneers may be gained from a description of their



activities which reveal men of strong character and a law-abiding nature. It is true that the usual frontier crimes — horse-stealing, murder, and counterfeiting — existed, but not with tolerance. Early Iowa history is replete with accounts of popular opposition to such offenses, even prior to the establishment of a well organized government.

The pioneers of Iowa possessed an inherent talent for constitutional government, though extralegal methods were sometimes employed to obtain it. Those "blackguard" miners of Dubuque as early as 1830 appointed a committee of five to draft the rules and regulations under which they were to be governed. The meeting of these committeemen may be called our first constitutional convention. Furthermore, the formation of hundreds of land clubs or claim associations bespeaks the early settler's desire for law and order: the desire for peace and orderly procedures even if he had to fight for them.

These claim associations appear to have been very effective in preventing any serious trouble in the matter of claim-jumping, although some rather tense situations were produced. Following the removal of the Indians in 1833, hundreds of settlers immediately flocked into the Iowa country and while each selected a place that suited him best, the new arrivals in most instances respected the premises of those who had preceded. What constituted a "claim" was generally understood and, although the region was not legally open to settlement, "a claim to a farm,



regularly established" was held to be just as good for the time being, "as if the occupant had the Government patent for it." The emigrant came into the country, looked around him, and, selecting a location that pleased him, he staked out his half section of land, one quarter section probably being woodland and the other prairie. The prospective settler then went to work, built a house, fenced, plowed, and planted a piece of ground, and his home was "secure from trespass by any one whatever, until the Government shall think proper to prefer its claims."

The early settlers were not greedy — they merely asked of the government that they be allowed to buy part of a section at the regular price of \$1.25 an acre without having it exposed to public sale. "This privilege has been considered as justly due to the settler, in consideration of the increased value given to other lands around him, at the expense of great toil and privation to himself." The pioneers did not claim the "privilege of thus buying unreasonably large bodies of land;" only asking "to have extended to them the same advantages as have been granted to all pioneers before them". If more than the usual amount of land was desired they were ready to compete for it in the open market.

Lieutenant Albert M. Lea's *Notes on Wisconsin Territory*, published in 1836, vividly describes conditions in the "Iowa District". He wrote of the groves of oak, elm, and walnut, "half shading half concealing", the "neat hewed log cabins of the emi-



grants with their fields stretching far into the prairies, where their herds are luxuriating on the native grass". In discussing the character of the early settlers he remarked that it was "such as is rarely to be found in our newly acquired territories. With very few exceptions, there is not a more orderly, industrious, active, pains-taking population west of the Alleghenies, than is this of the Iowa District. Those who have been accustomed to associate the name of *Squatter* with the idea of idleness and recklessness, would be quite surprised to see the systematic manner in which everything is here conducted. For intelligence, I boldly assert that they are not surpassed, as a body, by any equal number of citizens of any country in the world."

As to the early inhabitants of Dubuque, Lieutenant Lea and Mr. Murray paint entirely different pictures, though both wrote of conditions as they appeared in the summer of 1835. Indeed, Lea seems to have been much surprised that in a mining region, "there should be so little of the recklessness" usually found in that sort of life. "Here is a mixed mass of English, French, German, Irish, Scotch, and citizens of every part of the United States," he wrote, "each steadily pursuing his own business without interrupting his neighbour."

Lea was of the opinion that this state of affairs might be "attributed to the preponderance of well-informed and well-intentioned gentlemen among them, as well as to the disposition of the mass of



people." In some of the older migrations it was the "reckless in character, the desperate in fortune, or the bold hunter, that sought concealment, wealth or game". But as far as the Iowa country was concerned, it was "the virtuous, the intelligent, and the wealthy" that sought a congenial abode for themselves and posterity.

The law-abiding character of the early pioneers is also illustrated by the organization of a mutual protection association among the residents of Burlington in 1833. They resolved that any person allowing the Indians to have whisky should forfeit all the whisky he had on hand, and likewise the confidence and protection of the association. It was also "*Resolved*; That any person harboring or protecting a refugee who, to evade justice, has fled from the other sections of the Union, shall be delivered with such refugee on the other side of the river." Those were stern days and severe measures were required in a region where regular governmental machinery was lacking.

The regard of the first settlers for religion is evidenced by early writings. In a little guide book on Iowa Territory compiled by Willard Barrows, a deputy United States Surveyor, and published in 1845, the author called attention to the fact that although "the peaceful sabbath bell" is not heard, yet "the sabbath is here, and its benign influence is felt in every hamlet and cottage throughout this new and flourishing country." While the costly "edi-



fices, like those which adorn our Eastern cities" are not to be found, yet "in almost every village is seen the humble temple, consecrated to the worship of Almighty God."

Not only were the early Iowans law-abiding and religious; but they admirably combined those attributes with intelligence and industry. The rapid development of the new region was unusual. One writer was positive "that the annals of history have never been able to record a more rapid progress of settlement than here exhibited; and that, too, with equal intelligence, industry, and enterprise." It was but yesterday that "our settlements were confined to the narrow limits along the borders of the Mississippi river; but to-day we behold the newly reared cabin and cultivated fields for a hundred miles in the interior. But yesterday, the war-whoop and scalping-knife were the terrors of the land; but to-day, there is peace in all our borders, and the industrious farmer feeds his sheep, where the wild deer lay in his covert; and to the nightly howl of the prowling wolf, has succeeded the familiar bark of the faithful house-dog."

The pioneers of Iowa counted many Europeans among their number. Of the 192,214 inhabitants as recorded by the census of 1850, nearly 21,000 were of foreign birth; and of this number over one-half were English-speaking — Irish, English, Welsh, Scotch, and Canadian. In some instances colonies of Germans, French, Hollanders, Hungarians, British, and



Scandinavians settled in little communities by themselves. Early in 1840, for example, a small group of Norwegians settled on Sugar Creek, about twelve miles northwest of Keokuk. There is a statement on record that one of the party "traded an old breech loading musket for a quarter section of land" while another secured an equal area for a yoke of oxen, "and thus the first Norwegian settlement in Iowa was founded."

Such men as these were in truth the makers of Iowa. They found the vast plains a wilderness, and left them a veritable garden; they brought no inheritance other than strong arms and willing hearts. Some of them were extremely religious, others decidedly atheistic; yet they had this in common — perseverance and daring. Possessed of a "faith in themselves and in the country which they had selected" from choice and not from necessity, "they set to work building their log cabins, clearing the timber and tilling the soil, and year by year they saw their small earnings increase". Their acres multiplied and their log cabins were soon given up for larger and more commodious houses.

Mrs. Frances D. Gage visited Iowa in the summer of 1854 and contributed some "Sketches on Iowa" to the New York *Tribune*, giving glowing accounts of the prosperity of the State with its "flourishing new towns, springing up, as it were, by magic, between night and morning." Her impressions of the inhabitants were no less flattering. "The people



are the strong, earnest, energetic, right-thinking and right-feeling people of the land." The founders of the Commonwealth, she thought, "must have been wiser than most men, or they would not in the beginning have recognized all grog-shops as nuisances, and have made the vendor of ardent spirits liable for his own transgressions. They must have been more just than common men, or they would not at first have secured the property rights of the wife, and made her the joint guardian, with her husband, of her children. They must have been men more humane than common, or they would not have secured the homestead to the family. These good laws have led those of other States who wish to be wise, just, and humane, to become the dwellers of this fair land. Hence I hesitate not to say that it is the most moral and progressive, as well as the best-improved State, of its age, in all our country."

The people of the East, she warned, must cease to think of Iowa as "way out West". Indeed, "the people who last year, or last week, or even day before yesterday, left New England, New York, Pennsylvania, or Ohio," she wrote, "with the last *Harper* or *Putnam* in their pocket, the last *Tribune* in their hand, the last fashion on their heads and shoulders, and the last reform in their hearts, are very much the same people in Iowa that their neighbors found them at home, only that a new country, log cabins, and little deprivations call out all their latent powers, cultivate the fallow ground of heart and feelings,



make them more free, more earnest, more charitable; in fact, expand, enlarge, and fit them all the better for life and its duties.”

Mrs. Gage attended a political meeting at Oskaloosa in 1854 to hear a Free-soil nominee for Governor speak. There the “men looked just like men elsewhere, only they were a little more civil and genteel, and did not make quite so general a spittoon of the Court House; and I did not see one that leaned toward drunkenness, though the house was full. I went to church; fine astrals, polished walnut, and crimson velvet made the pulpit look like home; ladies rustled rich brocades, or flitted in lawns as natural as life. The only point of difference that struck me was, that their bonnets, with a few exceptions did not hang so exactly upon nothing as in the East; probably because there was less of nothing to hang on.”

In a word it may be observed that two “breeds of migrant men have made the West,—the seven-league-booters and the little-by-littlers. Early Iowa invited the latter class, not the former. Few pioneer plainsmen came far, or came with the spirit of rovers. Trekking from Indiana or Illinois, bent upon finding cheap lands, anxious to escape competition, they sought the same chances for frontier fortune building which had once enriched their elders. Iowa was therefore a huge overflow meeting, thronged with the second generation of middle-Westerners. Quite naturally, then, the state lacked



the era of gorgeous desperado jollity which fell to the farthest West." Iowa's beginnings were rather commonplace: sensible folks merely came here and lived. "And once settled upon their spacious, wind-blown prairies, these migrant peoples so mingled that the resultant Iowa was not a mosaic, but an emulsion. Moreover, the uniformity of the prairie itself contributed to the uniformity of the Iowans by destining nearly all to be farmers."

From one point of view the character of the individual is the important consideration, but when examined from another angle "it is the merit of the mass, not the merit of the individual, the humbler, and for matter of that the mere brown-colored virtues, not the blazing, sporadic flashes of genius or prowess, that establish the real greatness of a people. Unrelieved industry, morality, intelligence, and loyalty make very melancholy material for literary or artistic treatment; but when your soul is bent upon finding a happy augury for your country's future, what better can you seek? Happily this state of Iowa, so typical of the broad, fertile, populous valley of the upper Mississippi, stands representative of the bulk of our people."

GEO. F. ROBESON



## A Pioneer Journey

In the spring of 1841 I had my means all locked up in produce — corn, flour, pork, and bacon — and I found that it would be necessary for me to realize early on a good portion of my stock in order to replenish my store. The spring was late that year, and it was well along in April before I could get a boat to carry me up the river. At last I found the steamer *Smelter*. Scribe Harris, the captain, said he was going up as far as Prairie du Chien, and I concluded to go with him. On our way up we went into Snake Hollow where I made a profitable sale. At Prairie du Chien I found that the fur company had received no spring supplies and was in need of provisions. During the forenoon I sold them my entire stock, all at fair prices, and received my pay, cash down, in gold and silver. A large part of the company funds in those days consisted of Spanish silver dollars.

Captain Harris, finding the Wisconsin River very high, decided to take the opportunity of bringing down a cargo of shot from a shot tower up that river. Inasmuch as he might be gone a week, I was

[This account of the experiences of J. M. D. Burrows on a trip from Prairie du Chien to Davenport in 1841 is adapted for THE PALIMPSEST from his book, *Fifty Years in Iowa*. Mr. Burrows came to Iowa from Ohio in 1838, and until just before the Civil War was the most prominent merchant, miller, and meat packer in Davenport. — THE EDITOR]



in a quandary as to a means of getting back to Davenport. Gold and silver was at a ten per cent premium, our paper currency being nothing but "wildcat" issued at Green Bay, and I was very anxious to be home with my money. There was no boat above and none expected from below, but upon inquiry I learned that at some Grove, about twelve miles from Prairie du Chien, a stage would pass through at three o'clock the next day. I made up my mind that I would take that stage.

The next morning after breakfast I went back to the fur company's office and got my silver exchanged for gold as far as possible. Having procured some strong brown paper, I went to my room, wrapped each piece of money separately, and did them up into small rolls. Each pocket was loaded with all it would hold and the rest I tied up in a strong handkerchief.

At eleven o'clock that forenoon I took a lunch and started down the river. Three miles below I struck the Wisconsin River which was booming high and seemed to run with the velocity of a locomotive. For half an hour, off and on, I rang the ferry bell, but no ferryman appeared. At last I saw that I would either have to go back or paddle myself over, so I launched the ferry canoe and shoved off.

I had never been in a canoe before and did not know how to handle it, but soon found that I had to sit very still, flat on the leaky bottom. The canoe kept going round and round, and every few minutes



would dip some water. Meanwhile the current was conveying me swiftly down to the Mississippi.

I thought I was lost. I would have given all my money to be safe on either shore, and why I was not drowned was always a mystery to me — but I suppose my time had not come.

I noticed that as the canoe whirled around each turn brought me nearer to the shore. I also began to manage the paddle to better advantage, and finally touched some willows, which I caught, and pulled the canoe as near the shore as I could. Then I jumped overboard and got on dry land as soon as possible. After I had straightened up and let the water drain from my clothing I set forward again.

About a mile farther on I came to a small creek. The water was fully four or five feet deep. There was no bridge and the stream could not be forded on account of the perpendicular banks. After some examination I saw there was no way but to jump it, so, choosing the narrowest place I could find, I pitched my bundle of money across, took a run, and jumped! Just made it, and that was all.

As I struck the edge of the bank one of my coat pockets gave way and fell, with its heavy contents, into four feet of water. I hunted up a forked stick and, luckily, the lining having gone with the pocket, soon fished it out. Making for the stagehouse as fast as I could go I arrived without further trouble, only to find that the stage had gone!

I then determined to make my way to Dubuque



on foot, hoping to find a boat there bound down stream. About dark I came to a cabin where I decided to stay all night. I was puzzled to know what to do with my money, as I might be robbed — perhaps murdered. My first thought was to hide it in a pile of brush near by, but I was afraid some one would see me, so I resolved to share its fate.

On applying to the woman at the cabin for lodging she referred me to her husband who was at the barn, so I interviewed him. He said I could stay. He was a rough-looking man, and I did not feel very safe.

After he had taken care of the stock we went to the house together. Supper was nearly ready. I took a seat by the fire with my bundle by my side. In a few minutes supper was announced and I went to the table, carrying my bundle with me.

Just then two of the hardest-looking men I ever saw came in and sat down at the table, eyeing me sharply. Just as I was becoming a little alarmed the proprietor bowed his head and asked a blessing on the meal. No human being can realize what a feeling of relief came over me. All anxiety about my money and my life passed away.

Early the next morning at the break of day I was on the road again, determined to reach Dubuque some time that night. At noon it began to rain, but I persevered. At sundown I reached Parsons' Ferry, fifteen miles above Dubuque. Being on the Wisconsin side it was necessary to cross there, and again I was troubled to arouse the ferryman. After



nearly an hour, however, he answered my signal and set me over. By this time it was pitch dark and raining hard, and I had fifteen miles yet to go. I took the middle of the road. The mud was very deep, and the darkness so intense that an object could not be seen six inches away.

While plodding along with my bundle in one hand and a big club, which I used as a cane, in the other, I ran against a man. Neither of us had seen the other. I was not a coward, but never in my life was I more startled than at that moment. My heart choked me so that I could not articulate plainly but, with my club raised, I stammered out, "What do you want?" I realized from his mumbling and incoherent reply that he was drunk, so I walked around him and pushed on my way.

At eleven o'clock that night I reached Dubuque, having walked seventy-five miles in thirty-six hours. I was not acquainted in Dubuque and did not know where to find a hotel. After wandering about some time I met a man whom I asked to direct me to the best tavern in the place. He did so but as I did not know the names of the streets or their location I could not find the house. Tired and bewildered, I accosted another man.

"My friend," I said, "I wish to find the best hotel in town. I am a stranger and have been hunting your town over for some time, up one street and down another, until I have become confused. Will you be kind enough to come along and show me?"



He cheerfully did so. It was a first-rate house — the best I had seen above St. Louis. I had a nice, clean room, all to myself, and the table was well provided. I told the landlord he need not bother to cook anything for me; that although I had had nothing to eat since daylight, I would be satisfied with a cold lunch and a cup of hot coffee. On going to bed I gave orders not to be called in the morning unless there was a boat going down.

I did not awaken until noon the next day, when my landlord knocked at the door and said there was a boat at the landing, going down. I was so sore and stiff I could scarcely dress myself, and had to slide down the banister to get down stairs. The boat was not scheduled to leave until three o'clock, so I took dinner with my kind landlord. We got under way toward night, and reached home the next forenoon. I was so lame for ten days that it was as much as I could do to attend to my business.

Such were the trials and labors of a pioneer merchant of those early days.

J. M. D. BURROWS



## Bridging the Cedar

Walk up South Street from Battery Park in New York City late some summer evening and look straight ahead. Brooklyn Bridge, a gigantic cobweb dotted with points of light, is before you. Along the arched steel span of the cobweb drift the white lights of passing cars while the red and green lights of river craft float mistily beneath. There it stands — in its day the wonder of the world, and still, after forty years of service, a monument to the constructive genius of man.

Thirty-two years before the famous Brooklyn Bridge was opened for traffic, a suspension bridge very similar in appearance to the marvelous structure spanning the East River was constructed over the Cedar River in Iowa. But the history of the Cedar River Suspension Bridge is a far different story.

The year 1850 found Muscatine a growing river town of 2540 inhabitants, awake to its advantages as a distributing center for the inland trade. Long newspaper articles proclaimed the necessity of building graded plank roads over which much of the produce of central Iowa would find its way to market. Projects such as these, it was thought, could not fail to pay big dividends — perhaps twenty cents on each dollar subscribed. To the enthusiastic



boosters for Muscatine, the broad Cedar River about ten miles to the west afforded no serious obstacle to their plans for trade expansion. It should be bridged.

Accordingly, during the summer of 1850, arrangements were made with N. L. Milburn, an inventor and contractor from Paducah, Kentucky, to erect his patented suspension bridge over the Cedar. This structure was supposed to be much more durable than the Remington arch bridge. Both Mr. Milburn and his bridge were recommended to other communities by Muscatine enthusiasts.

To finance the project, the Muscatine, Washington, and Oskaloosa Road and Bridge Company was organized. The name elicited from a local editor the remark, "what a long tail our cat's got". Stock was sold without difficulty through personal solicitation to business men, townspeople, and farmers. The stockholders elected a board of directors and Joseph Bennett, one of the principal shareholders and an energetic supporter of the project, became president of the company. So completely did Mr. Milburn gain the confidence of the directors in his integrity and in the merits of his plan that he was not required to furnish bond but was urged to proceed with the construction of the bridge with all possible dispatch.

Material for the structure was brought up the Mississippi River on the small steamer *General Bem*, thence up the Iowa River to its juncture with the Cedar, and then up the latter stream to the spot



designated for the erection of the bridge — a place nine or ten miles west of Muscatine. At this point the timbers and lumber were unloaded and, early in the autumn of 1850, Milburn and his crew began work. The eager stockholders and merchants looked forward to the early completion of the structure.

There were some citizens in Muscatine, however, who had doubts about the success of the project and did not share the optimism of the directors. In fact, certain critics were outspoken in their opposition to the type of bridge being built. Common sense principles of construction should be used, they argued, instead of the new-fangled idea of a suspension bridge. Others objected to the site of the new structure. It was a big mistake, in their judgment, to put the bridge any place above the junction of the Iowa and Cedar rivers. But the stockholders and directors of the company were indifferent to these criticisms, and the work of construction continued.

The *Iowa Democratic Enquirer* for October 19, 1850, published an item of news which was welcome to both the tradesmen of Muscatine and to the farmers living west of the town. "FARMERS, AHOY! BRIDGE!" The item read, "We are pleased to announce that a strong safe temporary bridge has been thrown across the Cedar by Mr. Milburn at the point of the Suspension Bridge and until the latter is completed, over which the farmers of that region are already bringing their produce. Come on. Market is brisk and prices high. Try us."



Another item in the same issue announced that the "temporary bridge over Cedar at the site of the Suspension Bridge is strong and safe, and being on a level with the shore is very easy crossing. We were on the ground Thursday last and were struck with the energy with which Mr. Milburn pushes forward the work. Mr. M. is determined to make a good bridge a 'model bridge', even if he loses by the contract."

Throughout the autumn, work on the bridge continued and a visitor to the scene of construction in December, 1850, reported, "The work is in a forward condition and going ahead with all dispatch compatible with its perfect combination of strength and durability. It now presents a most imposing view, and one of great interest. All were pleased with the appearance of the work. . . . Mr. Milburn by his polite explanations, convinced us of the merit of his plan."

Expenses of construction mounted, however, and soon exceeded the original estimate so that in January, 1851, perturbed stockholders of the Muscatine, Washington and Oskaloosa Road and Bridge Company held a meeting to determine what should be done. It was disclosed at this meeting that \$10,000 had already been spent, that a debt of \$4500 in addition had been incurred, and that \$2500 more had to be raised to prevent the company from losing all that had been invested. A spirited discussion ensued. Finally, resolutions were passed to issue



preferred stock certificates in sums not less than five dollars, these shares to bear interest at ten per cent payable semi-annually. Principal and interest of this loan were to be paid out of the first tolls collected and the bridge itself was to be pledged as security for the loan. The stockholders of the company were to be given ten days to advance this additional \$2500, which amounted to twenty per cent of the total stock already subscribed. After ten days any unsold stock was to be offered to the public. The editor of the *Enquirer* hoped that the stockholders themselves would raise the necessary sum. "Walk up gentlemen", he urged. Although the majority of the stockholders had subscribed all that they felt able to give, the danger of losing the amount already invested and the hope of rich returns from tolls led them to furnish the required \$2500. The crisis was met and construction continued.

Late in January, 1851, the stability of the new bridge was subjected to a severe test. Shortly after the trestle work was joined in the center, but before it was made secure by hogchains and bolts, a high wind blowing upstream carried away the scaffolding below and left the center span without support. Although the unsupported section deflected twelve to twenty inches upstream before the wind, not an inch did it give downward. The rest of the work stood firm and unmoved. Although the windstorm caused about forty dollars damage the company felt that



the successful test of the stability of the bridge was worth twice that amount. Thereafter the bridge stood unsupported, without staging or props.

Other towns began to notice the new structure and newspapers made favorable comments. The Burlington *Hawk-Eye* remarked, "The Muscatine folks have flung an arch of 600 feet span across Cedar River. The trestle work is said to be beautiful, and the bridge is to be one of the handsomest and the most substantial in the Union. Travellers from about pronounce the new bridge the most magnificent structure of the kind they ever beheld."

Indeed, the bridge was, in appearance, all that its admirers claimed. On each bank stood two high square towers reaching ninety feet above the surface of the river. These towers were five feet square, each side being the width of four logs which had been squared and bolted one to another with big iron bolts. The logs, perhaps twenty feet long and over a foot square, were of tough, hewn oak and were placed end to end, jointed at the middle of the adjoining log. The bases of these towering piers were sunk in the ground on the banks almost as deep as the bed of the river but no stone was used in the foundation to make them more secure. Between each pair of towers extended heavy, six by six inch cross braces high enough above the road so as not to interfere with travel. Heavy wire cables supported the driveway of the bridge, which was twenty-one feet wide at the piers and narrowed to twelve feet



in the middle. The driveway spanned the river in a graceful arch, high enough in the center to allow the small steamboats to pass under. The wire cables came together in bundles at the top of the square towers then extended downward toward each bank and were fastened to logs buried several feet in the ground as anchors. Long approaches on trestle work sloped up to the twin towers on either side, joining the driveway at a point fifteen feet above the bank of the river. On each side of the long approaches was a plain wooden railing while an ornamental railing of wooden cross-pieces extended along the sides of the high arched driveway. Including the approaches, the total length of the structure was said to be twenty-one hundred feet and the span between the piers was six hundred and fifty-seven feet. All who saw the bridge praised the beauty of its design and marvelled at its strength.

By April 3, 1851, the work was so nearly finished that the president of the company, Joseph Bennett, rode across on horseback, the first man to cross in that fashion, but he had to turn back without landing on the west bank of the river because of the uncompleted condition of the approach.

During the night of April fourth, twenty-four hours after Bennett's triumphal ride on the bridge, a terrific storm of rain and wind swept down the Cedar Valley. Lightning revealed the swaying, swishing branches of trees. Suddenly, there came a heavy rumble, a ripping, wrenching crash, and the Cedar



River Suspension Bridge, the pride of Muscatine and the envy of other river towns, fell with a tremendous splash into the swirling waters below. The long arched span first parted in the center, then each half swinging around before the wind pulled the towers from their fastenings in the earth. The hogchains held firm and the whole structure tumbled into the river.

Great was the consternation among the stockholders when the news reached them. What was to be done? Milburn, it seems, confident that his task on the Cedar was drawing to successful completion, had gone to Keosauqua to begin work on another bridge. The *Iowa Democratic Enquirer* aired its views on the subject in the following item: "Our citizens were startled from their propriety on Saturday last by the news of the fall of the Suspension Bridge over Cedar River. It was like a shower on a stand up shirt collar to their hopes and calculations. The thermometer of public spirit stood at a low figure, and many feared that no degree of enthusiasm for any future project, could raise the mercury of individual liberality to the giving point. But subsequently upon a calm view of the calamity, it has lost more than half its horrors — though it is still regarded as a great triumph by that class of mushroom prophets, — 'birds of ill omen' — who, after every disaster, cock up their eyes, and with a toss of the head side-wise exclaim, 'ah, ha, I told you so!' The sensible view of the subject is that it's down, and can't be



helped — it must Go UP AGAIN, stronger and better, and that is a fact. The individual who supposes or teaches that Muscatine cannot recover from the loss of \$15,000 in a bridge, or that such a loss will discourage the public spirit of an intelligent community, should be tapped for the ‘simples’— and the man who has any interest in the city, and will now lay his hand on his pocket, and declare that ‘they’ve got the last cent they’ll get from me!’ should go straight to Bevard and order a pork barrel, that he may be headed up in it — he can receive all the food, air and light he needs through the bung hole.”

Following this outburst against the calamity howlers the editor proceeded to describe the appearance of the wreck. The timbers of the towers were shivered somewhat and the ornamental trestle work of the arched span was smashed in some places, but for the most part the structure was but little broken. Although nearly two-thirds of the plank flooring had floated down the river most of it was caught and landed at various points below. The inclined approaches at each end were uninjured. The disaster proved, thought the writer, that the bridge was strong enough to resist any amount of perpendicular weight but that it needed some lateral support to hold it against high winds.

The editor argued that it would do no good to grumble about the errors of the builder or to complain about the carelessness of the directors in not requiring him to give bond. “The bridge must be re-



erected and made to stand," he insisted. "We have the material for which our money has been paid,—the timbers are ready to be again put together. What has been done has cost \$15,000. From three to five thousand more will make it right and secure against the loss of the whole amount invested and last, though not least, the bridge is necessary for the prosperity of Muscatine and when completed as it should be will pay a handsome dividend to the stockholders. Those who think the means cannot be had should learn that it will not do to estimate other men's good sense and liberality by their own. The sum necessary can and will be forthcoming—a gentleman who lives beyond the bridge and has now no stock, declared on the ground Sunday, that he was ready to subscribe to put it up again. We heard one citizen in town who has no stock, say yesterday that he was ready to subscribe, and one other who has five shares, that he was ready to take four more. The money can and must be raised—if not one way it must be another—the bridge must and will go up—go up on common sense principles and under bonds from the contractor. The City of Muscatine is able to build a dozen such bridges, and this misfortune will only call forth her energies. We hope the directors will take the necessary steps to raise the means to put the bridge up as it ought to be. It won't do to stand still now."

Spirited discussion marked the meeting of the directors of the bridge company following the dis-



aster. The sentiment expressed by the editor prevailed, however. The board resolved that the bridge should be repaired and, as soon as they could hear from Milburn as to what he would and could do in the matter, they proposed to push the work forward rapidly.

Long articles from stockholders in the bridge company and others interested in the project appeared in the *Iowa Democratic Enquirer*. "The bridge on the upper route is down," wrote one enraged shareholder. "We should bridge the Iowa below the mouth of the Cedar. About \$20,000 will build a good bridge. None of your Milburn bridges."

Another contributor, signing his name "Muscatine", was moved to remark, "The bridge has fallen; and with it has fallen the countenances of all who were interested in its successful completion. This is a great calamity which falls heaviest upon the directors of the bridge company. Many are heaping odium upon them for not having Mr. Milburn under bonds, so that in the event of the bridge proving a failure, as it has, the stockholders would suffer no loss. But this is no time to curse the fruits of the indiscreet or fall into sulky melancholy and refuse to go forward with the improvements necessary for the good of our town. This misfortune should only incite us to greater caution and renewed energy and determination in going forward with this work. Now is the time to form a new bridge company and build a bridge on good common sense principles



below the forks of the Cedar and Iowa where the bridge should have been built in the first place.”

One of the stockholders felt that any rational being might have known that such a heavy structure could not stand without better support. He recommended that if the present company did not choose to rebuild the bridge, they should hand it over to the mayor and city council of Muscatine who with the assistance of the marshal might make it stand by the force of a city ordinance. Then in a more serious vein he admitted that all the money of Muscatine had not gone down the Cedar River and that he for one was willing to re-subscribe for as much stock as he had originally.

What did Milburn propose to do? News of his opinions and plans was eagerly sought. Late in April, word came from him that he would return to Muscatine in a short time to restore the bridge. He expressed his conviction that it could be reërected and rendered durable and secure. This information raised the hopes of the directors who forthwith dispatched a special messenger to confer with him at Keosauqua.

A few days later, however, came the disturbing news that Milburn would not return to reërect the bridge. He was reported to have said that his contract at Keosauqua prevented his leaving there and, moreover, that he had lost confidence in the suspension type of bridge for the Cedar River, on account of the length of the span and its location.



This report was a sad blow to every shareholder. What should be done? Some proposed that a bridge should be built from trestle work to trestle work, supported by strong abutments with a pier in the river and a draw section over the channel. Others favored the suspension type of bridge and wished to proceed with the replacement of the fallen span. Still others wanted to sell or assign the stock to a company which would guarantee to erect the bridge. They believed that the lure of fifteen or twenty per cent in tolls would attract a reputable company if the stockholders would agree to sell. No agreement could be reached.

Later in the month of May the report reached Muscatine that Milburn had changed his mind and that, if the directors would support him, he would raise the bridge and make it a permanent structure. Again hopes mounted, and confidence was nearly restored when Milburn further asserted that the bridge could again be placed upon its abutments at small expense and could be made secure against storms by means of suitable lateral fastenings.

Milburn did return to Muscatine toward the middle of June, 1851, considerably nettled by newspaper criticism of his conduct as a contractor. He threatened to hold the editor of the *Iowa Democratic Enquirer* personally responsible, but the editor advised him not to let his angry passions rise and refused to retract any of his statements. After a few days Milburn left Muscatine, promising to return soon



and make definite arrangements for the reërection of the bridge.

Apparently he never returned. The wreck was finally sold late in the autumn of 1851 to Joseph Bennett who planned to rebuild the structure during the coming spring. In the meantime, however, railroads became the all-absorbing topic and attention was focused on the project of securing a line through Muscatine to Oskaloosa. The Cedar River Suspension Bridge was forgotten, but for many years its rotting timbers and rusting cables remained — mute monuments to the soaring ambitions of Muscatine merchants and the wrecked hopes of the farmers to the west.

BRUCE E. MAHAN



## Comment by the Editor

### THE DEMOCRACY OF PIONEERING

Whatever the social and political opinions of the American colonists may have been, their descendants have for a century or more been pledged to the idea of democracy. Nor has the concept of democracy been confined to popular government. The meaning of the term has been expanded from the strict construction of the Greek root words to include social and economic conditions. Democracy has become a shibboleth of the American people. The reason for this lies not so much in the general acceptance of a well-reasoned theory as in the force of circumstances.

Where social inequality exists, government by the people is either nominal or impossible; but where every man lives on the same plane as his neighbor, where all are engaged in a common enterprise, and where there is no distinction of race or class or creed, there democracy is inevitable. Probably never in the history of the world were conditions better adapted to obliterate social, economic, and political differences than in the settlement of the Mississippi Valley. When the hardy American frontiersmen crossed the Alleghenies and centered their attention solely upon the conquest of the conti-



ment they created conditions which preordained the establishment of democratic institutions. While other factors contributed to the democratization of American politics in the era of Andrew Jackson and Henry Dodge, the life of the pioneers was the most potent influence of all.

The men and women who filtered into the Ohio Valley and spread westward to the Missouri, who established settlements, subdued the wilderness, and compelled obedience to the laws of God and man faced more perils than Ulysses in all his wanderings. They came of their own free will, impelled by no political or religious incentive and leaving no grievance behind; they sought new homes and a chance to shape their own destiny; and, inspired with the zeal of creating, they founded a dozen Commonwealths. Hard work, privation, danger, a common occupation, and absolute equality of opportunity were the character-building conditions in the life of the pioneers — conditions admirably suited to inspire faith in democracy. Indeed, democracy is the very essence of such a life.

Pioneering is not only inherently democratic but it develops the very qualities of citizenship which make democracy successful. Honesty, justice, and intelligence are at once the prime virtues of good government and the stock in trade of the pioneers. For shrewd common sense, keen judgment, and broad understanding the early settlers in the Great Valley have seldom if ever been excelled, while the



claim associations and extralegal courts are eloquent testimonials of their innate sense of justice. The absence of locks and the hearty hospitality for neighbor and stranger alike bespeak their own regard for common honesty. Self-reliance, courage, and resourcefulness — all important elements in the art of governing — are also equally descriptive of prominent traits in the character of the winners of the West.

Being accustomed to social equality and community coöperation, fixed in the habit of self-determination, and richly endowed with the principal qualifications for good government, the pioneers naturally claimed for themselves extensive participation in politics. They revolutionized political practice. What wonder that democracy is an American watchword. It is the experience of the race.

J. E. B.



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