

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.