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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-

lices, 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