

## 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.

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