

# THE PALIMPSEST

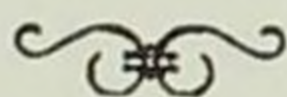
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## Women in History

The American frontier line moved westward across Iowa during the space of a half century of time. It first impinged on the Half-breed Tract in Lee County in 1830. During the next four decades it swept inexorably over broad prairies until 1870 when only the four northwesternmost counties — Lyon, Sioux, Osceola, and O'Brien — remained beyond the frontier. By 1880 the frontier line had left Iowa behind, pushing beyond the Big Sioux River and penetrating well into Dakota and Nebraska. A decade later, in 1890, the United States Census Bureau declared the frontier line, heretofore measureable, had bounded across the Rockies, reached the Pacific, and left only islands of unpopulated mountains and wasteland in its wake.

The rugged frontiersman is usually credited with the conquest of the prairies, plains, and mountains lying between the Mississippi and the Pacific. Too little attention has been paid those courageous women who went hand in hand with

their husbands and families to brave the hardships of pioneer life. These women not only raised families but played a stellar role in promoting the religious, educational, and cultural pattern of the American frontier. This is particularly true in Iowa.

Women were numbered among the first to penetrate the Half-breed Tract in Lee County. Maria Stillwell, wife of Moses Stillwell, was probably the first white woman to make a permanent residence in Iowa, coming to what is now Keokuk in 1828. The following year Dr. Isaac Galland brought his wife and family from Edgar County, Illinois, and settled on the west bank of the Mississippi at Nashville in Lee County. In 1830 Isaac Campbell arrived with his wife. By the close of that year several families were clustered about Nashville, and a school was built for their children. This was the first school in Iowa and it was opened three years before permanent settlement began in the Black Hawk Purchase.

Farther up the Mississippi, two intrepid women claim the honor of being the first to settle at Dubuque. In September of 1832, Hosea T. Camp moved with his family into a log hut on the island adjoining Dubuque. It is said, however, that Mrs. Noble F. Dean was rowed over to Dubuque in the fall of 1832, and spent the night in a cabin there. These incidents transpired in Iowa before the Indians vacated the Black Hawk Purchase on June

1, 1833, paving the way for permanent white settlement in Iowa.

In the years that followed, births, marriages, divorces, and even a claim jumping feud that involved a gun-toting heroine — Louisa Massey — add color and interest to the Iowa story. By 1838 the Territorial Census revealed the proportion of males to females was only four to three, the ratio of women probably being that high because the census included boys and girls who must have been about equal in number. The average number of members per household in 1838 seems to have been between five and six.

The arrival of pioneers in family units was particularly noticeable in the overland migration to Iowa. "So far as I could learn," one observer wrote, "no person in all that multitude traveled alone, or unattached to a family; and of the very few unmarried men among them each was usually, if not in every case, a member or a near relative of the family to which he was attached." This migration of females westward was not limited to the poor. During the fall of 1839 Governor Robert Lucas and his two daughters visited the site of the newly-selected seat of government in Iowa City. Truly the Iowa frontier held no fear for even the more sheltered women.

Although the Census of 1838 reveals more females present in the Black Hawk Purchase than generally suspected, it should be remembered that

women were very much in demand on the Iowa frontier. They married young, and newly arrived females seldom remained single very long. At Dubuque, where males outnumbered females 1,381 to 928, women were fondly remembered in the thirteenth toast delivered at the Fourth of July celebration in 1838. "The Fair of Iowa — May they all be blessed with matrimonial felicity; kind, warm hearted souls, God bless them." As the band bravely struck up "Haste to the Wedding," a lump must have formed in the throat of many a lonely bachelor, for women were scarcest in the mineral region.

Women played a leading role in the establishment of schools and in the founding of Sunday schools and churches. They contributed to and helped organize the first church in Iowa — the Methodist Church at Dubuque. In 1836 Mrs. Louisa King opened a school for young ladies in Dubuque which lasted until 1839. Her daughter, Louisa F. King, assisted her as a member of the teaching staff. In 1839 Miss King became instructor in modern languages in the first classical school in Iowa, Thomas H. Benton, Jr., being in charge. A generation later this same Thomas H. Benton, then Superintendent of Public Instruction for the State of Iowa, reported that 599 out of the 1,339 schoolteachers in Iowa were females. Out of a random group of 100 teachers 32 per cent were under 21, while 88 per cent were under 32 years,

graphic testimony of the youth of the frontier. Unhappily, men received double the salary of women, and it was being urged that more female teachers be employed to train the "plastic" minds of Iowa children. Equally significant is the fact that only one Iowa-born teacher was listed out of 556 teachers whose place of birth was recorded in 1854.

The women who settled in Iowa before the Civil War were leaders not only in religion and education, but also in the temperance movement, the Abolitionist crusade, and Woman's Rights. Their resourcefulness is revealed by the fact that at least one woman, Lucy Earll, who served as postmistress in Muscatine during the 1840's, married Oliver Hudson Kelley, the first telegraph operator in Muscatine, who became a founder of the Patrons of Husbandry, or National Grange.

Iowa editors in general were keenly alert to the need for making way for women in various fields. On August 31, 1872, the *Estherville Northern Vindicator* quoted the following item from the *New Northwest* entitled "Girls, Learn Trades."

Would this advice could reach every girl in the land. The great curse of woman is her dependence and helplessness. And these are caused mainly by her having no trade or profession by which she may earn a livelihood and be independent. And not only girls need this advice, but their mothers also. Mothers should impress upon the minds of their daughters, as much as upon the minds of

their sons, that it is their duty to be self-supporting members of the Commonwealth. But this is far from being the prevalent opinion to-day. The common idea is that it is not woman's place to do any kind of work except unremunerative household drudgery. Girls are taught that marriage is the end and aim of their existence, and that it is the duty of their husbands to support them.

This might all be very well — although it is founded upon an unsound principle — if husbands did really support their wives; but they do not in the great majority of cases. And the consequence is that many, very many, with high aspirations and noble longings — who, if they were unfettered from the thralldom of the kitchen, would rise high in the ranks of their profession or avocation — are tied down to an unremunerative life of toil and drudgery. We do not say that woman should not cook or do housework, but we do say they should be allowed the same latitude of choice of the diversified labor of our country that men have. If a husband really loves and cherishes his wife as he should, would he not rather behold her in her chosen profession or avocation receiving remunerative employment than confined to the kitchen all her days?

It is worthy of mention that a decade after this editorial was written the October, 1884, issue of the *Annals of Iowa* (Second Series) featured an article by Jennie McCowen, A.M., M.D., entitled "Women in Iowa." The editor of this historical quarterly, the first publication of the State Historical Society of Iowa, observed in an editorial footnote that Dr. McCowen's article was "a notable example of what woman is doing and can do in Iowa." It had been prepared at the request of

the Iowa Commission for the World's Exposition which was being held in New Orleans.

Dr. McCowen based much of her article on the Federal Census of 1880 dealing with statistics on Iowa women. Her own personal experiences, her wide reading on the subject, as well as widespread inquiry throughout the state, are clearly reflected throughout the study. After praising Iowa's "progressive and liberal attitude" toward women, Dr. McCowen harkened back a half century to the time when women were first entering the Black Hawk Purchase in 1833.

In the "good old days" of our grandmothers there was more than enough work for women at home. But man invaded her "sphere," and with the invention of machinery one after another of her fireside employments was taken out of her hands. Her carding and dying, spinning and weaving have been absorbed by the factories; tallow dips are obsolete; the making of soap, one of the lost arts of the household; the hats and caps, and shoes which she made for herself and her children were long ago laughed to scorn; the making of men's clothing, as of youth's and children's as well, has been taken out of her hands by the immense manufactories, which are also grasping after the making of all kinds of women's furnishing goods, even down to the infant's bib. All this work and much more is now done out of the home, and done better, more rapidly and more cheaply by machinery. So that now there are many more women than are required to do the remaining work of the domestic circle.

After pointing out that the Census of 1880 revealed over eighty thousand Iowa women were

gainfully employed, Dr. McCowen noted that women had invested money in almost every kind of industry and business enterprise in the state. Many had become managers of wholesale and retail millinery firms, groceries, general dry goods and drugstores, and a variety of other stores handling china, fancy goods, toys, stationery, and books. The long list included women in straw works, hair works, photograph galleries, glove and hose factories, and jewelry. Mrs. Mary Turner was a stockholder, secretary and treasurer of the street railway in Des Moines, while a Mrs. McMurray was secretary of the Dey Mountain Mining and Milling Company in the same city.

Dr. McCowen referred with pride to the fact that women could also be found in pursuits supposed to be monopolized by men — from boiler makers, boot and shoe makers, and marble and stone workers, to pork-packers, barbers, blacksmiths, commercial travelers, and detectives. There had been a constant increase in the number of saleswomen, as well as in the number of bookkeepers and cashiers. According to Dr. McCowen:

We have two women who are presidents of banks, Mrs. L. A. Weiser, of Decorah, and Mrs. L. B. Stevens, of Marion; three who are brokers of money and stocks, four who are clerks and book-keepers in banks. An increasing number of young women have found employment in shorthand and type-writing. The number attending schools of this kind have increased rapidly. In nineteen schools in the State from which I have been able to collect statistics,



almost one-half the students are now young women. . . . Ladies can qualify themselves for court-reporting, but the duties are not so agreeable as the work in an office. We have one woman, however, Mrs. Fannie Harrison, of Clarksville, Iowa, who is doing most excellent and satisfactory work in this direction. Fifteen ladies are empowered to act as notaries public, there are five county recorders and various clerks, deputies, etc. The post-office and the offices of enrolling and engrossing clerks for both the House and the Senate have been filled by women for a number of years. The State librarian, the librarian of the State University, of many colleges and of many, if not most of the city libraries are women. . . . And lastly we have *manicures*, whose foothold in the list of our business enterprises ought certainly to gain us immunity from the further reproach of being "wild Westerners."

Dr. McCowen was especially pleased with the inventive genius of Iowa women as revealed by the following patents granted them:

- Miss Flora Grace, Webb City, for a thermometer
- Miss Eugenie Kilbourne, Cedar Rapids, egg beater and griddle greaser
- Mrs. I. T. Lamborn, attachment to door screens
- Viola J. Angier, Spencer, album for photographs
- Mrs. L. S. Avory, Manson, ironing board.

In education, in literature, in art and science, women had made giant strides. In her own field of medicine, Dr. McCowen observed, the balance in her bank account bore graphic testimony of the "increasing respect for and confidence in the capabilities of the woman practitioner of medicine." In 1880 there were 73 women doctors in Iowa.

Other professions were opening to women. Her investigations disclosed there were 43 registered pharmacists, 110 nurses, three lady dentists, and seven graduates of Iowa law schools. According to Dr. McCowen, Mrs. Emma Haddock of Iowa City was the "first woman" ever admitted to practice in the U. S. Courts.

After discussing the role of women as ministers, as leaders in benevolent and philanthropic enterprises, in the W.C.T.U. and Woman's Suffrage movement, and in fraternal organizations, Dr. McCowen declared her readers should not overlook the 310,896 women who are heads of families.

No work can be more ceaseless, more taxing, more deserving of appreciation at the hands of the commonwealth than the training up of the future citizens into healthful, useful and moral men and women; and many are the women to echo the sentiment of a mother of ten boys, who, when interviewed in regard to her public efforts, replied, "*I would rather be known as the mother of my boys.*"

The four women whose careers are sketched herein were born in other states, achieved considerable fame before coming to Iowa, but added greatly to the luster of their reputation as Daughters of Hawkeyeland. Three of the four — Bloomer, Harrington, and Sudlow — lie buried here. They have left an imperishable record for all to follow.

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