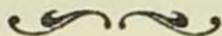


# THE PALIMPSEST

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## Lorenzo S. Coffin—Farmer

To promote the settlement of the northwestern counties in the years of readjustment following the Civil War, the Iowa General Assembly, in 1870, created a Board of Immigration to attract settlers from the eastern States and Europe. The Board was continued, with some changes in the basis of selection, in 1872, but in the code revision of the following year provision for the work was omitted and the Board's activities ceased on September 1, 1873.

Under the direction of the secretary, Alexander R. Fulton, the Board of Immigration functioned through publications, original and subsidized, and soliciting agents at home and abroad. The twenty-seven agents who served during 1872 and the summer of 1873 in Germany, Holland, England, and the eastern States received no compensation, with the exception of one who was given \$700 for two years' work, and less than \$1500 was allowed for their total expenses. They were evidently per-

sons who had other interests in the regions served and were motivated by unselfish devotion to the general welfare of the State. That such uncompensated service was carried on conscientiously and effectively was attested by Governor C. C. Carpenter who in his message in January, 1874, included Lorenzo S. Coffin among the agents whose service had been "conspicuously active and successful".

According to the official record, Coffin was commissioned on May 26, 1873, and hence his travels were conducted during that summer and his undated report, which follows this sketch, must have been hastily penned shortly before the Board's legal expiration. The outlook that season was especially gloomy as a major grasshopper visitation was added to the prevailing financial depression. The writer's confidence in the immediate security and future progress of the State's agriculture is consequently all the more striking. But in spite of many disillusioning experiences he was always a persistently hopeful individual.

Lorenzo S. Coffin was withal an interesting man and a man of many interests whose nonagrenarian career never lacked special causes for support and agitation. He was born in New Hampshire in 1823 and secured his education in a New England academy and in the preparatory department of

Oberlin College. As a teacher in an Ohio seminary he had had as pupils James A. Garfield and the future mistress of the White House.

A poor but aspiring pioneer he had come to Iowa in the winter of 1854-1855 and settled on a quarter section in Webster County which was later to be expanded and transformed into his celebrated Willowedge Stock Farm. The Yankee reformer was an enthusiastic participant in all the successive projects of his time to better and strengthen prairie farming and to improve rural conditions of living. He was a pioneer breeder of Shorthorn cattle, Poland China hogs, Oxford Down sheep, and Morgan horses. As he tells in his report, he had made extensive ventures in dairying. According to a correspondent of the Burlington *Haw-Eye* in 1881 his farmstead was a model in arrangement and equipment.

As a true son of crusading Oberlin and an ex-schoolmaster, he was concerned with organized efforts for educational, material, and moral betterment. He was active in State and local agricultural societies, an organizer and official of the State Alliance, and a strong supporter of agricultural education. For several years he was agricultural editor of the Fort Dodge *Messenger*. He had shown the sincerity of his abolition zeal by service in the Union Army both in the ranks and

as a chaplain. Prohibition thereafter became his moral crusade and after serving for many years in State and regional temperance societies, he was the candidate of the Prohibition Party for the office of Governor in 1906. He was especially concerned about the reformation of former convicts and founded a home to promote the rehabilitation of some of them. Each Sunday for seventeen years he acted as a voluntary circuit-rider preacher, serving without compensation neighborhoods that had no regular church organization.

Next to his agricultural labors, undoubtedly, Coffin's most notable public service was as a State Railroad Commissioner (1883-1888 in succession to another agricultural leader, "Tama Jim" Wilson). In this position he became a persistent and effective champion of State and Federal laws for safety devices for railroad employees. The long and usefully varied career of this pioneer farmer and reformer came to a close on his farm near Fort Dodge in 1915.

EARLE D. ROSS