

Comment by the Editor

AGUE

"A touch of fever and ague caught on these rivers, I dare say," proclaimed Mark Tapley, "but bless you, *that's* nothing. It's only a seasoning; and we must all be seasoned, one way or another. That's religion, that is, you know."

Martin Chuzzlewit lay wrapped up in a blanket on the ground in a miserable shack at Eden. "He was to all appearance, very ill indeed, and shook and shivered horribly; not as people do from cold, but in a frightful kind of spasm or convulsion, that racked his whole body."

According to the emaciated inhabitants of Eden, the malady came from a "fetid vapor, hot and sickening as the breath of an oven," which rose from the black ooze of the marshy ground. It "came forth at night, in misty shapes, and creeping out upon the water," hunted whom it might infect like a spectre until day.

"The night air ain't quite wholesome, I suppose?" said Mark.

"It's deadly poison," was the settler's answer. It was typical of immigrant guides that the

agents who induced Martin Chuzzlewit and his friend to seek their fortune as architects at Eden did not mention the prevalence of malaria out west in the new country. Speculators, explorers, and other geographical reporters usually described the climate of the upper Mississippi Valley as being salubrious. Albert M. Lea declared that, away from the sloughs along the Mississippi below Rock Island, the Iowa country was "as healthy as any can be" where there was so "much vegetable matter to decay." There is scarcely a hint of chills and fever in the literature of western allurements.

The diaries, correspondence, and reminiscences of the pioneers tell a different story. Few early settlers escaped the dreaded "shakes". A candidate for the legislature in 1838 was sure that, of the hundred voters in the Half Breed Tract, "at least eighty of them had the ague; so that it was almost impossible to get anything to eat." The army surgeon at Fort Dodge in 1852 reported that malarial fever was the most common ailment among the soldiers at that post. Observation and experience with the disease often discouraged prospective immigrants like A. W. Gilbert and Joseph Swartzendruber. But the early settlers generally seemed to accept the ague as one of the natural hardships of pioneering.

Neither doctors nor patients suspected that mosquitoes were to blame for the misery of ague. They thought malaria emanated from the soil. Because the disease seemed to be more prevalent in newly settled districts, it was supposed to be caused by "miasmatic poison generated by vegetable decomposition" which was released from freshly broken sod. Not until 1898 was the mosquito convicted of disseminating the ague parasite. By that time most of the swamps in Iowa had been drained and malaria was following the wild ducks into oblivion.

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