

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

VOL. XVII

ISSUED IN OCTOBER 1936

NO. 10

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A Trip to Iowa in 1841

On the twenty-ninth of July, 1841, Alfred West Gilbert, a young surveyor of Cincinnati, set out for the West. Having just finished surveying a number of Kentucky and Ohio turnpikes, he had a comfortable savings account and no employment. To try to forget a disappointment in love and to gratify his curiosity, he "determined to see a little of the 'Great West' of which Iowa was the promised land".

Boarding a steamer at Cincinnati, he proceeded to Saint Louis, where he remained long enough "to take the dimensions of the giant of the West." He then took passage on a steamer for "the upper country", landing at Keokuk at the foot of the lower rapids. He found Keokuk "a small, mean looking place, in what was called the half breed tract, belonging to the Indians", in which as yet no title to the land could be secured. Not liking the appearance of the place, he left on the first stage for Fort Madison. This town he considered

well situated, "having a fine landing, a high & gently sloping site & a 'back country' which [could] not be surpassed for fertility & beauty". From Keokuk to Montrose, at the head of the rapids, the country was "high & rolling, presenting some beautiful lands, prairies & timber." Some large mounds, "the graves of the red men," were observed near Montrose.

Gilbert called on a grocery firm to whom he had a letter of introduction, stayed all night in Fort Madison, and left the next day for Burlington. At that time Burlington was still the capital of the Territory of Iowa, though Iowa City, in the interior, had been chosen as the permanent seat of government. It was thought that the land back of Burlington and Fort Madison, lying along the Des Moines and Skunk rivers, was as fertile as any in the Territory and "probably the most settled of any other portion." Burlington was decidedly the center of business in the Territory. The citizens seemed to "understand their own interest by encouraging an extensive system of internal improvements." Owing to large swamps in the vicinity, Burlington was not considered "so healthy as some other places along the river."

From Burlington the young surveyor took a boat for Davenport. On the way, the steamer stopped at Bloomington [now Muscatine], a place

of importance because it was "the nearest port on the river to Iowa City." Bloomington seemed to be a thriving little place which would become "the depot of the produce of the Country above the 'City' & also for the goods for the 'City'." Between Burlington and Bloomington he noticed a large slough and several ponds near the river — "certain causes of fevers & agues."

The country along the river between Bloomington and Rock Island, a distance of about twenty miles, was "very beautiful & well adapted for farming purposes." From the top of the bluffs, which were from half a mile to a mile and a half from the river, the land sloped gently to the bank of the stream which formed a fine pebble beach. "The graceful round of the bluffs covered with timber, & the prairie & meadow sloping to the river," presented a diversified, rich, and novel prospect which charmed many an eye. Nevertheless, a person might grow weary of "its beauties upon a more familiar acquaintance."

Of the country in the vicinity of Rock Island, Gilbert wrote: It is "the most beautiful of the kind I ever beheld, the views from innumerable different points embracing the vast valleys of the Mississippi & Rock rivers, the noble Mississippi studied as it is with innumerable islands, the villages of Stephenson, Davenport & Rockingham with

the island of Rock Island & its fort, the handsome residences of Messrs. Le Claire & Davenport all tend to render the scene one of delightful interest. It is in fact one of those quiet domestic kind of views which the eye loves to contemplate, usefulness & comfort are the prominent features of the landscape."

At Davenport there were several homesick families from Cincinnati. They found this "small & quiet town of the Territory" a great change from the bustling city. Founded by Antoine Le Claire, a half-breed Indian, the village was growing rapidly. Le Claire, "of french extraction, tho a native," was described by Gilbert in 1841 as "a large portly very dark complexioned man." The Le Claire House had been built at a cost of more than twenty thousand dollars and was the best hotel in the country. There our traveller stayed a day and night. By that time he had found a friend of his father's, Thomas Wood, a former Cincinnati brewer, who invited him to stay at his home.

Adjoining the town lay a tract of eighty acres which could be bought for \$800. "It was very beautifully situated on the river & on the upper side of town." The land was "mostly prairie," with "clumps of trees dotted over it" like a gentleman's park. "I spent nearly all one Sunday feasting my eyes upon the beautiful landscape", wrote

Gilbert, "but I could see no money in it." As he was gauging its possibilities as a sheep and cattle farm, rather than a town site, he did not purchase, thus missing a good investment.

After spending almost a week in Davenport, Gilbert started for Iowa City on foot. He left his saddle bags at the hotel and travelled light, with a clean shirt in his pocket and an umbrella to ward off the hot sunshine of the prairies. The umbrella proved to be useful in killing snakes, for the prairies were infested with rattlesnakes about two and a half feet long. On the prairies a certain weed with a small white blossom grew in profusion. The Indian name for it meant "rattlesnake's master". Indians would come to the agency, he was told, and for ten cents would allow themselves to be bitten by rattlesnakes. They would then chew the weed, swallow part of it, apply the rest to the wound, and suffer no ill effects from the bite.

Gilbert spent the first night on his journey to Iowa City at a settler's cabin. The next day he dined at a solitary house in the midst of an extensive prairie, and stopped for the second night at Moscow, a settlement on the Red Cedar River consisting of but two log cabins with "their respective out houses." The land along the Cedar was very rich, producing fine tobacco. It was at the beginning of hay harvest, "a cheering sight to

see how amply nature had provided." All the farmer had to do was "to select the choicest spots, cut, dry, & take home" as much hay as he wanted.

West of the Red Cedar River, the country gradually became high and rolling. Gilbert saw few settlers until he came to the Bloomington road near West Liberty. All the timber land was claimed and a great deal of it was entered. "Wherever there were groves" there were settlers. Along Wapsinonoc Creek the land was very superior in quality with a fine growth of timber on it.

On the fourth day, Gilbert rode into Iowa City with a farmer, with whom he had stayed the night before. Iowa City had a personal interest for him because his dearest friend, Denman Ross, had helped to shingle the first house erected in the town. There he found the capitol in the course of construction, being built of native stone, which "takes a fine polish & is filled with a very peculiar fossil that gives it a very pretty appearance, when polished."

In his journal Gilbert wrote: "Iowa City the seat of government for the territory is handsomely situated on the bluffs of the Iowa river & is a high, dry & healthy site; the position of the state house is very fine, commanding a view of the surrounding country; it is a good, substantial building composed of limestone of excellent quality, part of which is

marble, obtained from quarries near the City. The general arrangement of the town reflects no little credit upon the Commissioners appointed to lay it out. The streets are wide & regular; the state house has large grounds allotted for the benefit of the public; there is also a park of forest trees, in which will soon be the centre of the town, & several donations to Colleges & other institutions of a public nature. They have in fact displayed good taste & a liberal spirit, & such will be appreciated by a generous public. Iowa City is improving rapidly at present & will do so for some time having a surrounding country of great fertility & being well situated with respect to timber. Three years ago the site of this City was an unbroken wild, known only to a few hunters & the Indians. It now contains a population of about nine hundred. It was selected as the site for the Capital of a territory whose population were principally along the Mississippi & was thought to be too far back; now it is almost surrounded by settlers. The Iowa river is a beautiful clear stream & abounds in fish. An Engineer of U. S. & party, had gone up the river to see how far it was navigable, or rather, I suppose, to ascertain the probability of its being navigable at all."

At Iowa City a young lawyer invited Gilbert to join a party then being formed to go west to the

Des Moines River on a buffalo hunt. After thinking it over, he decided to see the more settled parts of the country, and so, after spending four days in Iowa City, he started to walk to Dubuque.

The few settlers in that part of the country lived in a very rude and primitive fashion. The first night was spent "at Ivanhoe on the Red Cedar river, the principal building of which was a miserable double log cabin; the family consisted of three generations, the *very* old folks were both sick abed. The night was sultry & being upon the river" there were plenty of mosquitoes, "& to mend the matter," Gilbert had to sleep with his host in a narrow bed, which with "the heat, mosquitoes, & the occasional shrill cry of a sick baby," which his "bed fellow had to get up & nurse now & then, made it anything" but a restful night. He rose early the next morning and after a good bath in the river, paid his bill and "jogged along".

The appearance of Linn County, "the finest part of the territory," pleased him very much. There was some doubt "whether this County or Van Buren on the Des Moines river" had the fairest lands, but Gilbert was certain that Linn County "afforded the greater facilities to farmers." There was sufficient timber for building purposes and the land was beautifully undulating, so that drainage was good. The prairies "seemed boundless in ex-

tent with occasional clumps of trees or sometimes winding lines of trees which skirted some stream."

After looking around Linn County, Gilbert went on his way to Dubuque, where he arrived on September 5th, having travelled from Iowa City in a leisurely fashion and quite alone. He noticed that the soil was more sandy near Dubuque than it had been near Iowa City, though the general topography of the land was about the same.

On the way Gilbert saw one place that he would have liked to own. It was at the crossing of the Mosquito River [probably the north branch of the Maquoketa River at Cascade]. Situated on "a clean sheet of water of ten foot fall & about 30 ft wide," was a small mill with comfortable buildings and good farm improvements around it. There one might spend a lifetime in "peace & plenty."

Dubuque was a city of considerable size and looked quite venerable in comparison with other Iowa towns. There, near the Catholic convent were old apple trees, said to have been planted by the early missionaries. But Dubuque was "a place of importance only from the fact of its being in the region of the rich lead mines; the appearance & location of the town anything but prepossessing". The population was "composed partly of french, old settlers, partly of Americans who [were] generally in commercial pursuits". A large

portion of the Irish worked the mines. The "gaity of the french & the hilarity of the irish prevail at one end of town on Sunday while at the other end the sober & staid Americans go to church."

Thus far on his trip Gilbert had found the people of the Territory "unusually intelligent & industrious, mostly from the eastern states, tho many were from northern Illinois, whose parents were from the eastern states." He made the interesting observation that few old people had come into the Territory, the larger part of the settlers being young or middle-aged.

After spending a very pleasant Sunday in Dubuque, Gilbert left the next day in the company of a young dentist for Galena. In those times a dentist provided himself with a horse and buggy, packed his equipment into the buggy, and travelled from place to place to practice his profession. Galena was situated in a "rugged country all torn up with mining for the lead ores." It was a town of considerable business and wealth, being improved at great expense.

The next afternoon they left for Dixon on the Rock River, sixty-five miles distant. The country along the Rock River was generally flat, "the soil very rich & light & the Causes for fever & ague very numerous." The country immediately about Dixon was "rolling & handsome, the river beauti-

ful in the extreme but the Demon Ague stalked o'er the land," unaffected by pioneer remedies.

A sudden change in the weather and an insufficiency of clothing caused Gilbert to catch cold and he arrived at Dixon quite ill. Nevertheless, he took the stage for Rock Island and Davenport. When the stage stopped at Crandall's Ferry for supper, however, he was so ill with congestive typhus fever that he was obliged to remain with the Crandall family for five weeks. Gilbert's bed was in the same room where all the meals were cooked and eaten. Since the stage stopped there for breakfast and supper, a quilt was hung around his bed to afford him a little privacy. The Crandalls gave him every attention within their power and Doctor Maxwell came to see him every day. Some days the doctor himself was so ill with ague that he was barely able to make his round of calls. When asked why he did not give himself a little rest, the valiant doctor replied that he did not have time because he was the only doctor in the community, so he "took quinine & let her shake."

For seventeen years the Crandalls had shaken every year with the ague, but they were confident that in time they would "outgrow it". Mr. Crandall's favorite occupation was fishing at night in a boat with a light at the bow, spearing the fish while they were dazed by the light. Eventually,

Gilbert became strong enough to continue his journey to Davenport. He bade the Crandalls farewell with feelings of regret, making them such little gifts as he happened to have with him. To Mrs. Crandall's niece he gave his prayer book.

Returning to Davenport, he went to the home of Thomas Wood, where he had a slight relapse. By this time Gilbert was homesick, thinking that he would rather work in the rain in Ohio than in the wind in Iowa. He was heartily tired of the prairie breezes. When a boat, the *Galena*, finally came down over the "upper rapids", he gratefully embarked for Saint Louis. When the water was low, the rapids were a serious inconvenience because they caused the boats so much delay. The *Galena* passed down to the head of the lower Des Moines rapids and could get no farther. The passengers and freight were transferred to a keel-boat which carried them to Keokuk. Again Gilbert was delayed by the *Indian Queen* which dallied five or six days before starting. A great deal of business might have been done at Keokuk had it not been for the deplorable conditions regarding the establishment of land titles.

On the twentieth of November the *Nonpareil* from Saint Louis arrived at Cincinnati. Gilbert was glad to get home again, but the Iowa country had made a deep impression upon his mind. He

wrote in his journal: "With respect to the Ioway Country I would only remark that I believe no country presents so great facilities for the farmer; no country holds out such inducements for the cultivation of its soil teeming as it is with the most luxurious vegetation, at the same time having an atmosphere pure & sweet; no country presents to the eye a more beautiful prospect of rich prairie & timber land & no country is settling or will settle with the like rapidity.

"The population of the territory are generally intelligent & industrious, more so I think than has usually been found in settlements of so recent a date. A farmer of three years' standing here is considered, and is, an old settler, & his farm, when he has used common industry & discretion, presents the appearance of a farm of 20 years standing in Ohio, with the exception of an orchard. Vegetation of every kind grows with surprising luxuriance; at present the want of mills is felt, but they will soon be supplied as capital comes into the country. It is surprising to see the quantity of produce shipped this season from the upper Mississippi, when last year there was scarcely any. In a few years the trade of the upper Miss. alone will engage as many boats as the Ohio at present."

OPHIA D. SMITH