

Explorations of Iowa

As early as 1673, before King Philip's War or Bacon's Rebellion, two brave Frenchmen, the woodsman Louis Joliet and the missionary Jacques Marquette, skirted the eastern shore of Iowa on their momentous voyage of discovery. Toward the end of June they visited a village of Illinois Indians then dwelling a few miles inland on the Iowa side of the Mississippi, and a few days later passed the mouth of the Des Moines River on their way to the South Sea or the Gulf of Mexico, they knew not which.

During the century and a quarter that followed, roving Indians traversed the prairies of the Iowa country, French adventurers passed up and down the Mississippi, fur traders bartered for pelts with tribesmen along the Iowa streams, and in the days of the Spanish régime in the Mississippi Valley three Frenchmen — Basil Giard, Julien Dubuque, and Louis Honoré Tesson — obtained land grants along the eastern edge of Iowa. These men knew something of the region, but not until after the United States purchased Louisiana from France in 1803 was the extent and character of the Iowa country revealed in official reports. Then within a twelvemonth two governmental exploratory expeditions skirted the borders of what is now Iowa, the

one up the turbid, shifting channel of the Missouri River and the other up the broad sweeps of the Mississippi.

On the 18th of July, 1804, the famous Lewis and Clark expedition, sent by President Jefferson to explore the newly-acquired territory of Louisiana, reached what is now the southwestern corner of Iowa. From July 22nd to the 26th, the party encamped near the present boundary of Mills and Pottawattamie counties and, while the men dried provisions, mended oars, and hunted or fished, the leaders, Captain Meriwether Lewis and Captain William Clark, prepared dispatches and maps of the country. At this place they enjoyed an abundance of ripe grapes and the fishermen caught a plentiful supply of catfish, but the hunters were less successful although deer, turkeys, and grouse were sighted. Pushing on up the Missouri River in their three boats the explorers camped several times on the Iowa shore. Thirty-five days were consumed in traversing the distance from the southwestern corner of the present State to the mouth of the Big Sioux River where the Missouri turns westward.

On the 20th of August the expedition landed a short distance below the present site of Sioux City and there, weakened by an attack of a virulent summer malady, Sergeant Charles Floyd died—the first and only casualty of the entire journey. “He was buried on the top of the bluff with the honors due to a brave soldier; the place of his interment

was marked by a cedar post on which his name and the day of his death were inscribed.”

Lewis and Clark proceeded on up the Missouri River, leaving the land that is now Iowa, and pushed on to the Pacific Ocean. Upon their return two years later they reached the mouth of the Big Sioux River on September 4, 1806, and stopped at noon near Floyd's bluff. There they discovered that the grave had been opened and was half uncovered. Having repaired the damage they continued their journey down stream, and five days later they passed again the southwestern corner of Iowa.

To-day the tall monument near Sioux City, erected by Iowans to the memory of Sergeant Floyd, is a perpetual reminder of the famous Lewis and Clark expedition which, going out in 1804 and returning in 1806, skirted the western boundary of Iowa and made known through an official report the natural features of the region traversed.

In the summer of 1805, while Lewis and Clark were finding their way toward the sunset land, Lieutenant Zebulon M. Pike, then a young man of twenty-six, was sent from St. Louis by General James Wilkinson to explore the upper valley of the Mississippi River. On August 20th Pike and his companions arrived at the foot of the Des Moines Rapids near the present site of Keokuk, Iowa. With considerable difficulty they piloted the keel-boat through the dangerous channel to a place opposite the present site of Montrose. After presenting to-

bacco, knives, and whisky to a band of Sauk Indians who were encamped on the Iowa side of the river, Pike proceeded up stream. When the expedition reached the present site of Crapo Park, Burlington, Pike made a careful examination of the place and recommended it "as a very handsome situation for a garrison". A granite boulder dedicated by the Daughters of the American Revolution now marks this spot which won favor in the eyes of the young lieutenant. Continuing up the river Pike and his men encamped again and again on the Iowa side, and on Sunday, September 1st, the lieutenant arrived at the Mines of Spain. He was "saluted with a field piece, and received with every mark of attention, by Monsieur Dubuque, the proprietor". Attempts to learn detailed facts about the lead mines, however, brought only evasive answers. As at Burlington, the Daughters of the American Revolution at Dubuque have erected a permanent marker commemorating the visit of Lieutenant Pike in 1805.

A high bluff near McGregor so impressed the young explorer with its strategic possibilities that to this day it is known as Pike's Peak. Near the mouth of the Upper Iowa River the white men were received kindly by Wabasha, chief of the four lower bands of the Sioux, and were permitted to witness a medicine dance. Before his departure Pike presented the chief with tobacco, knives, and eight gallons of diluted whisky. Leaving the Sioux village on the afternoon of September 10th, and continuing

the ascent of the river the expedition soon passed beyond Iowa.

Seven months later the party again camped on Iowa soil, but the reports of the return trip are meager. In much the same way that the Lewis and Clark expedition revealed the facts about the western border of Iowa Pike's exploration afforded a picture of the eastern fringe of this trans-Mississippi domain.

Other explorers and visitors came and went in the Iowa country, each one contributing to the information about the new land. In 1820 Stephen W. Kearny made a trip from Camp Missouri near the present city of Omaha across Iowa in a northeasterly direction to Camp Cold Water in Minnesota. Somehow he gained the impression that the treeless prairies, the scarcity of surface water, and the rugged character of the hills would forever prevent the region from supporting more than a sparse population.

Sixteen years elapsed before any official report of the interior of Iowa appeared and then a thin little volume, *Notes on the Wisconsin Territory*, by Lieutenant Albert M. Lea, gave a vivid picture of the heart of the country. Lea's descriptions of interior Iowa were based upon observations made on a march undertaken in the spring of 1835 by three companies of dragoons from old Fort Des Moines up the valley of the Des Moines River to the Raccoon Forks thence to the Mississippi and back

again. On this exploration of more than a thousand miles Lieutenant Lea voluntarily assumed the duties of topographer and chronicler.

His report describes the slow progress up the divide between the Des Moines and the Skunk rivers, due to the soft ground still wet from excessive rainfall. The beauty of the Iowa landscape caught his attention and he wrote that "the grass and streams were beautiful and the strawberries so abundant as to make the whole tract red for miles." Game, too, was plentiful and wild fowl formed a part of nearly every meal. Aside from the discomfort caused by pelting rains the journey was a pleasant change from barrack life at old Fort Des Moines.

When the expedition reached a point near the present site of Boone the line of march veered to the northeast until the Mississippi was reached near Lake Pepin. Returning, the column headed west to the Minnesota lake region and thence, marching southward from the headwaters of the Des Moines River, the dragoons reëntered Iowa near the present site of Swea City. From the Raccoon Forks Lieutenant Lea and a companion descended the Des Moines River in a canoe, "taking soundings to report on the practicability of navigating keel boats over its course".

Lieutenant Lea was so favorably impressed with the Iowa country that he wrote: "all in all, for convenience of navigation, water, fuel, and timber; for richness of soil; for beauty of appearance; and for

pleasantness of climate, it surpasses any portion of the United States with which I am acquainted.”

It was reports such as this that revealed the amazing resources of Iowa. Lea's book and glowing descriptions of the region by other visitors led to the apparently endless stream of settlers who poured into the new country during the forties and the fifties.

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