

The
PALIMPSEST
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THE PURPOSE OF THIS MAGAZINE

THE PALIMPSEST, issued monthly by the State Historical Society of Iowa, is devoted to the dissemination of Iowa History. Supplementing the other publications of this Society, it aims to present the materials of Iowa History in a form that is attractive and a style that is popular in the best sense—to the end that the story of our Commonwealth may be more widely read and cherished.

BENJ. F. SHAMBAUGH

Superintendent

THE MEANING OF PALIMPSESTS

In early times palimpsests were parchments or other materials from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the records of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

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THE PALIMPSEST

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River Towns

Much has been said and written about frontier life in Iowa. The grim battles waged by the pioneer against droughts, locusts, prairie fires, and blizzards have long been a favorite topic with the historians, but the rôle of the Mississippi River has been curiously neglected. Of course the stories of Dubuque, Davenport, Tesson, and Le Claire are well known, but they belong more to the soil of Iowa than to its great river.

Along the western banks of the Mississippi are little towns that have been made and broken by the river. Many are quaint, old-fashioned villages hugging the banks of the river and sheltered by high bluffs from the cold winds that often sweep across the outlying prairies. Quiet and serene, they give the impression of being quite content with their situation, with never a dream of expanding inland. They have an air of permanence, these old river

towns. Other settlements may be tentative communities of transient pioneers, but the present inhabitants of the little river towns are the grandchildren of the founders. Facing the river, they seem to belong to it, having no desire to climb the bluffs and live on the prairie beyond. Uneven sidewalks of flagstones, abandoned sawmills, warehouses gauntly fronting the river and slowly sinking into decay, the faint trace of a boat yard, an old boat landing now overgrown with weeds and willows — are all mute evidences of a past that was part of the great river. Drowsing away, living much in the past, these towns seem to be awaiting the whistle of the long silent raft-boat which will arouse them to activity once more.

Rambling old houses of nondescript architecture line the streets that parallel the river or cling to the steep hillsides of the diagonal coulee. Since lumber was cheap, only the best material was used in the mansions of a generation ago, and the rafts yielded their choicest logs for the homes of the river men. Doors with transoms above and kitchens finished like a steamboat cabin are eloquent reminders of the owner's occupation. Occasionally the pilot house or the cabin of an old boat was the beginning of a comfortable residence of later days.

These are not typical country towns, for the farmer and the river man had very little in common. The farmers came to trade and sell their produce, but they were really outsiders, on-lookers at the

various activities that filled the lives of the river folk. A certain dash, an air of sophistication and worldly experience born of many trips to New Orleans and St. Louis distinguished the dwellers of these towns from their rural neighbors.

Transportation of both freight and passengers was made by boat. As late as 1900, several towns in Scott County boasted no railroad connections with the outside world. A "hack" made daily trips of fifteen or more miles from Le Claire to Davenport during the winter months and steamboats served in the open season. The mail, carried by rail to Illinois towns opposite, was ferried across to the Iowa shore. And crossing the Mississippi in an open boat when the ice breaks up in the spring is no enviable task.

The river man was a type. Just as the sea captain was devoted to his ship, so was the river man devoted to the river and its traditions. An aristocracy of the river was the natural product of the golden age on the Mississippi. The names of captains, pilots, and lumbermen were known from New Orleans to St. Paul. Sons followed in their father's wake and, learning river lore from childhood, they often served apprenticeships as "cub" pilots under men who had been associates of Mark Twain.

After the ice went out in the spring every able-bodied man was ready "to go on" a boat, and he stayed until the "fleet" laid up in October or November. (To-day it may be only a government boat engaged in surveying, dredging, or marking the

river.) With their season's earnings captains, pilots, deck hands, and stokers all settled down to a comfortable and idle winter. Of course, it can be truthfully said that many of these families who enjoyed beefsteak in the fall probably ate liver in the spring. But merchants were lenient in advancing credit, so why bother about bills? No river man of the old school found employment elsewhere when off the river for he knew no other trade or business.

Saloons, gambling rooms, billiard parlors, dances, and other social activities provided entertainment and recreation during the long winter months. Show boats, which have recently found a place in American literature, visited these river towns regularly. Just as the circus band drew small boys to the tent, so did the calliope draw them to the river bank. The saloon flourished above all other places of business, drink being the greatest weakness of the river man. A town of about two thousand inhabitants at one time boasted of thirteen saloons! Tying up for the night at a town was the signal for a celebration and probably more than one member of the crew needed assistance in returning to the boat. No wonder the notoriously tough river towns were the object of many revivals and prayer meetings!

The typical river man was a genial fellow, liberal with his money which went more easily than it came. He was not much worried about the future for he assumed that the river would always provide a living. So it is that few river men died rich and

many in their old age depended solely upon the small pension granted by former employers.

How the heart of the merchant in river towns was gladdened in those old days when a steamboat whistled and a boat put out to shore or when a landing was made! No wonder he slept above his store, for boats came and went by night as well as by day. Once, while looking through some papers in my father's desk, I found an old order for supplies to be ready when the boat passed Le Claire. It contained thirty-six items, including canned goods, fresh fruits and vegetables, hams, toothpicks, soap, molasses, and brooms. A footnote attached, stating that only goods of the best quality would be accepted, was proof that the crews were well fed and that the packets spread a bounteous table for the passengers.

River cooks were noted for their skill and many favorite dishes among the housewives in river towns to-day were originally prepared on the steamers. With a great abundance of everything the packet cooks found no difficulty in creating dishes that would tempt the traveller. Three or four kinds of meat, innumerable vegetables, both hot and cold breads, fruits, and pastries were included in each meal. Indeed, I have very pleasant childhood memories of stolen visits to a boat whose cook was a favorite of all children, and never did we leave empty-handed. Amusing stories are often related about these cooks — of he who carried salt in one vest pocket and pepper in the other pocket, and of

the one who annually cast a pan of biscuits into the water in memory of all river cooks who were dead.

Since life was centered about the river it is only natural that the arrival and departure of a boat was more or less of an event to the children. Many youngsters learned to read by spelling out the names of favorite boats, and such fascinating names they were — *Phil Sheridan, Red Wing, Northwestern, LeClaire Belle, Eclipse, Diamond Jo, North Star, Saturn* — all symbolical of romance and adventure. Mothers constantly worried about their children playing on log rafts, or riding the waves in small skiffs, and scarcely a season passed when some child was not pulled out of the water more dead than alive. It was perfectly natural that the river children took to the water like ducks. Truant boys could usually be located along the river bank or on small islands playing Robinson Crusoe in a shack of logs and willows.

Just as the cowboy had words and phrases peculiar to his life and occupation, so the river man's vocabulary abounded in provincialisms and characteristic terms. No little girl ever dreamed of calling a rope other than a line and all unskilled work on a boat was referred to as "decking". The cook's helpers were called "slush-cooks"; "roosters" were the men employed on raft-boats, possibly so called because they slept anywhere, always ready to go out on the raft. To address an old river man by the title of captain was the height of flattery.

Of course, the river man was a teller of tales — many true, some the delightfully improbable yarns spun on the deck, in the engine room, or around a card table. Politics had no fascination for these men, and rarely did a discussion of that kind disturb the minds or excite the temper of the genial group. Stories of races between rival boats (that most famous of all races between the *Natchez* and the *Robert E. Lee* still excites comment), storms on Lake Pepin, tieups in Cat-tail Slough, broken rafts, black nights when the rain fell in sheets and only instinct guided the pilot's hand, of the mate who ruled his crew by carrying the spoke of a wagon wheel about with him — all these and many more offer a rich field of romance and adventure for the professional story teller.

Tragedy stalked along the Iowa shores in Civil War times when cholera raged along the river. When the *Canada*, a North Line packet operating between St. Louis and St. Paul, cleared St. Louis she was free from the dread disease. But case after case broke out and just below Le Claire a landing was made and the victims were quickly buried on a near-by bluff. The graves were marked by rude stones from which the lettering has long since been obliterated by wind and sand. And again from the lower Mississippi during the Civil War comes the story of the *Sultana* which was blown up near Memphis, Tennessee, and fourteen hundred Union soldiers lost their lives.

We children were much interested in one white-haired pilot who for years brought a packet up from St. Louis. He had given his dog to some friends and every time the packet whistled "Maje" dashed to the boat landing, eagerly and affectionately greeting his old master. In his younger days "Maje" had been trained to look through the boats and barges for stowaways and seeping water. No watchman was needed to bring out the former, and "Maje's" wet feet were proof of the latter.

Since the steamboats all had distinguishing whistles, no one needed to scan the river to learn what boat was coming in. Only a few weeks ago I heard one of the few remaining steamers whistling a greeting to the captain's wife as the boat went up the river. But the long rafts, carefully guarded by the "tow-boat" and the "bow-boat", which used to float slowly past our house, have disappeared forever. Gone also are the packets white and trim, and the "side-wheelers" churning the water impatiently, with the captain on his bridge giving orders to the sweating, hurrying crew, while presiding over all the bustle and apparent confusion stood the pilot, serenely aloof and remote behind his wheel, confident of his knowledge of an ever-changing river.

Possibly not many people know that the Mississippi contains a series of rapids between the city of Davenport and the town of Le Claire. A government canal and locks have done away with the necessity of running the rapids, but before this canal was con-

structed every boat was steered over the rapids by a special pilot. Raft-boats never ventured over these rapids at night, and when the water was low the raft was divided and taken over in sections.

Whoever has lived in an old river town who can not recall the ghostly play of the lights along the shore as the pilot sought a landing; the creak of the lowering gangplank; the shouts of the mate and the crew as they made fast the lines? But the old river life is gone. The last raft floated around the bend of the river fifteen years ago and many of the old river aristocracy and lesser members have passed on. Only the quiet little river towns remain, sole relics of the romantic time when the Mississippi was the principal highway to Iowa, when steamboating was an art as well as a job, and when culture and gaiety reigned in the ports on the Father of Waters.

MARIE E. MEYER

A Transient County Seat

The location of county seats in Iowa has been a perennial subject of controversy. Of the ninety-nine county seat towns in the State, approximately two-thirds have been selected after contests with neighboring towns. Changes have been frequent, locations temporary, and removals almost inevitable. In Clayton County contests were so frequent and changes so numerous that an editor once suggested putting the county offices on wheels so that the seat of local government might be more readily moved from place to place as the whim of the voters should direct.

Clayton County was established when the original County of Dubuque was divided in 1837 by the legislature of the Territory of Wisconsin in session at Burlington. By the same act the county seat was located at the town of Prairie La Porte. Almost immediately, however, people in other parts of the county claimed that this selection had been made "for the purpose of promoting the private and individual interests of a few, to the great inconvenience of their fellow citizens," and that it was "highly detrimental to the general welfare of the county."

The first grand jury which convened in the county asked the judge of the district court for information relative to the method of changing the location of the

county seat. The jurymen believed that the seat of government "ought to be situated at the most convenient and eligible point nearest the center of the county" and that it should not conflict with the private claim of any individual or group of individuals.

In January, 1840, the legislature of the Territory of Iowa passed an act providing for the relocation of the county seat of Clayton County and appointed commissioners to select a new site. The law stated that the place to be selected should become the county seat in the following September, provided the people should vote to accept it at the August election. The commissioners met in accordance with the law, chose a location near the present site of Garnavillo, and gave it the name of Allotat, an Indian word alleged to mean gander.

At the August election of 1840, however, a majority vote was cast in favor of retaining the old location at Prairie La Porte. This decision was due to the fear that if a change were made at that time, speculators might enter the new town site before bona fide settlers could. In January, 1841, the land of the township containing the site of the proposed county seat was brought into the market and within the next two years most of the claims were entered. The reason for retaining the old location at Prairie La Porte was thus removed, and in February, 1843, another law was passed authorizing the relocation of the county seat, and a new commission was appointed to select the place. Popular approval at an

election was not required. Two members of this commission met in accordance with the law, decided upon a tract of land adjoining that chosen three years before, and gave it the name of Jacksonville. Later in the year 1843, the board of county commissioners held a meeting at Jacksonville, thus officially sanctioning the relocation of the county seat. In 1846 the name Jacksonville was changed to Garnavillo, in honor of a village with that name in Ireland. Judge Samuel Murdock, of Scotch-Irish parentage, suggested the new name and in his enthusiasm for the growing Iowa town he wrote a poem beginning:

Bright gem of the prairie, I hail thee with pleasure,
And take up my pen to address thee in verse;
Though bright be my theme or discordant my measure,
I hope thou'lt receive it for better or worse.
How oft have I gazed where kind nature had squandered
And lavished her grandeur and riches on thee,
And thought to myself as around thee I've wandered,
No spot in this world was so pretty to me.

For thirteen years the county seat remained at Garnavillo, but not without a series of contests. Indeed, all of the towns in the county which were eligible for the seat of government became contestants. No sooner had one place obtained the coveted prize than the others formed an alliance to secure a removal.

In 1847 the name of the town of Prairie La Porte was changed to Guttenberg in honor of Johannes Gutenberg, the German inventor who introduced the

use of movable type in printing. Guttenberg was a settlement of Germans, and has remained predominantly German, as its founders intended. A writer once jestingly remarked that there was "but one American in Guttenberg, and he was an Irishman."

While the county seat was at Garnavillo the thrifty German settlers of Guttenberg and the citizens of Elkader were continually trying to secure a change. In accordance with a law passed by the State legislature in 1849, a vote was taken on the question of removal. The election was held in April and resulted in two hundred and fifty-four votes for Garnavillo, one hundred and seventy-seven for Guttenberg, and one hundred and eighteen for Elkader. As none of the towns had a majority of all the votes it was necessary to hold a second election restricted to the two highest, Garnavillo and Guttenberg. This resulted in a majority of twenty-three votes for the former town, whereupon the county commissioners declared that Garnavillo should "be and remain the permanent seat of justice of said Clayton County".

This did not settle the issue, however, for in December, 1854, three petitions were sent to the legislature asking that some action be taken for relocating the county seat. One petition asked that the county seat be "speedily and permanently fixed," leaving the manner in which this result was to be attained to the discretion of the legislature. Another petition asked that a commission be appointed to make a selection, but that the people be allowed to

vote upon the question before a final decision was reached. The third petition asked that the whole question be submitted to the people. Because of the conflicting ideas expressed in these petitions the legislative committee failed to recommend any legislation at all, and the matter stood as before.

In January, 1855, a general law was passed which provided that whenever the citizens of any county desired to relocate the county seat they might secure an election for that purpose by a petition presented to the county judge. In accordance with this law, a petition signed by nine hundred and fifty voters of Clayton County was presented to the judge, asking for a vote on the question of removing the county seat from Garnavillo to Elkader. The petition was granted and a vote was ordered to be taken at the next April election in 1856. Elkader received eleven hundred and thirty-five votes while Garnavillo received only nine hundred and sixty-four. So the county seat was changed to Elkader and that event was made the occasion for printing some more so-called poetry.

The coveted prize was not retained long by Elkader, however, for the citizens of Guttenberg soon petitioned for another election and with the help of the citizens of Garnavillo they won the contest — the vote being two thousand and thirty-eight for Guttenberg and seventeen hundred and six for Elkader. But Elkader did not propose to submit tamely to this decision. An order of the court was

obtained forbidding the removal of the offices because of alleged fraud on the part of the citizens of Guttenberg. Before the writ could be served, however, the offices had been transferred to Guttenberg and no further effort was made by the Elkader partisans to have the election contested or the offices returned. That was in 1858.

The reestablishment of the county seat at Guttenberg was no particular advantage to Garnavillo, however, so the inhabitants of the town which had been founded as the "permanent" county seat set about securing the return of the county government from Guttenberg to Garnavillo. The petition for this purpose was signed by many of the citizens of Elkader. At the April election in 1859 the question was submitted to a vote, and Garnavillo won by a majority of one hundred and fifty-eight votes. Again the county officers returned to their old home at Garnavillo.

Almost immediately Elkader proposed a test of the issue against Garnavillo and a petition for this purpose was willingly signed by citizens of Guttenberg. Accordingly, the question was again submitted to a vote in 1860 and Elkader won by a majority of more than six hundred votes.

No time was lost in effecting the removal of the county offices to Elkader. Indeed, the county seat had become so transient that whenever an election was ordered the officials at once proceeded to pack their books and papers preparatory to an early de-

parture. In this respect the officers were said to be like "chickens that had been removed so often from point to point that whenever they saw a covered wagon they lay on their backs and crossed their legs ready to be tied."

The McGregor *Times*, in commenting on this election, said, "Elkader is undoubtedly the county seat of Clayton County for the ensuing year. At McGregor, Garnavillo received a majority of forty votes, but enough has been heard to admit of no doubt of Elkader's success. Here the voters care very little about the annual scramble. It is a disgrace to the county. We propose to Judge John Garber to purchase a daguerrean car, attach a pair of mules to it, locate the recorder and treasurer in the basement, finish a pilot house on deck for himself, and move the business around the county, locating in the timber during the winter and on the prairie in summer. We suppose a petition will be circulated in ten days for 'relocation' to some other ambitious point."

Four years passed, however, before another election was held for possession of the county seat. By that time McGregor had entered the contest. The election was held in November, 1864, and resulted in twenty-four hundred and three votes for Elkader and sixteen hundred and nine for McGregor. Apparently the more central location of Elkader and actual possession of the county offices were insuperable advantages.

Four years later, in 1868, Garnavillo again made a final attempt to secure the seat of justice. An election was ordered between Garnavillo and Elkader, which resulted in favor of Elkader by a majority of seven hundred and thirteen votes. This appears to have been the last election to settle the perennial rivalry between Guttenberg, Garnavillo, McGregor, and Elkader, although several efforts have since been made to have the question of relocating the county seat submitted to a vote — all without avail. Elkader has remained the capital of Clayton County for more than sixty-six years.

J. A. SWISHER

Comment by the Editor

THE ROLE OF THE RIVERS

Samuel de Champlain, chevalier, explorer, crusader, and governor at Quebec, zealous in the service of the king, anxious to add to the realm of New France, and imbued with the spirit of discovery, gave heed to Indian rumors of a "great water" far to the west beyond Lake Huron. Hoping to find a short route to the Orient, he dispatched the intrepid Jean Nicollet in 1634 to find the mysterious sea and carry gifts to China. At the end of a year Nicollet returned saying that he had found only Indian villages but that if he had proceeded three days farther upon the Wisconsin River he would have reached the sea.

For over forty years the lure of the Father of Waters enticed missionaries and explorers into the wilderness, some in quest of a passage to China and others searching for a mighty river called "Missippi". It was as though the "great water" was a siren calling the Frenchmen to take possession of the heart of the continent. But not until 1673 did Louis Joliet and Father Marquette paddle their canoes down the broad Mississippi; and it was nine years later that Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, claimed the great Valley in the name of Louis XIV, King of France.

Followed then a century and more when the Mississippi and its tributaries served as the principal arteries of transportation for soldiers, miners, fur traders, and settlers. France, Spain, and England fought for possession of the rich domain — and in the end, all of them lost. Venturesome traders and explorers paddled their swift canoes into the creeks and bayous, cordelled their clumsy flat-boats to the headwaters of the Missouri, and floated their bull boats down the shallow streams heavily laden with valuable pelts. Tons of lead were shipped to St. Louis from the mines of Dubuque and Galena. At last came the settlers, migrating down the Ohio and up the Mississippi and Missouri, bringing a potential commerce that was to fill the inland waters with keel-boats and packets. Thus the rivers continued to occupy the center of the geographical stage.

With the steamboats came the classic era of river traffic. Hundreds of palatial packets plied the waterways, carrying both passengers and freight. In 1843 the steamboats of the Mississippi Valley carried more than half the total tonnage of the whole United States. By day and night, in fair weather and foul, through floods and low water the pilots navigated the uncharted, shifting channels with amazing skill, dodging snags, sliding over sand-bars, following the current down-stream and seeking slack water up-stream, steering their course for two thousand miles by the location of obscure wood piles, dead trees, and points on the shore line or by sheer

memory on pitch-dark nights, reading the surface of the water for reefs or shoals or submerged wrecks, and remembering accurately the stage of the river at every bend and crossing from one trip to the next. The risks were enormous, but so were the profits. One steamer, operating on the Missouri River, cleared \$65,000 in 1866. Those were the golden days of river traffic, before the advent of the railroads. Possession of the Mississippi River was one of the decisive strategic achievements of the Union forces in the Civil War. And so the Father of Waters held the leading rôle as the drama of the Great Valley unfolded.

But now since the channels have been dredged and charted, snags removed, canals constructed, and crossings marked by signs and lights so that navigation is comparatively easy and safe, alas, river commerce has moved ashore to the railroads and motor trucks. Gone are the gilded, gigsaw packets. The time will come, however, when heavy freight will return amphibian-like to the waterways and the rivers will again assume a place of prominence. "The Mississippi should be made a loop of the sea", said Theodore Roosevelt. And optimists dream of the day when every river town in the Middle West will be a seaport.

J. E. B.

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