

The
PALIMPSEST
SEPTEMBER 1926
CONTENTS

Emerson at Davenport 265
HUBERT H. HOELTJE

For Value Received 277
EVANGELINE STONE COWMAN

Landscapes of Early Iowa 283
THOMAS H. MACBRIDE

Comment 294
THE EDITOR

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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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Emerson at Davenport

Almost as soon as there were enough settlers in early Iowa communities to make a public gathering possible, lyceums were organized and lecture courses became a regular feature of social life. An old fashioned lyceum existed in Davenport in 1841 and not two years after the first log cabin had been built in Johnson County, a meeting was called for the purpose of forming a lyceum in Iowa City. Professional lecturing began as soon as means of communication and transportation permitted.

“A spirit for instruction is abroad in the land,” according to the Davenport *Gazette* of January 27, 1842, “before which bows the demoralizing pagantry of theatres and corrupting influence of grog shops. It shows itself in the gathering of the people to learn wisdom as it falls from the lips of the lecturer. Every city paper that we receive applauds the talents of gifted men, who are endeavoring by

means of public lectures to reform and instruct their fellow creatures. There is no better manner of improving our minds and morals than by attending the drawing room of the lecturer." Within a decade after the admission of Iowa into the Union, the lecture system had become a well established institution in the State, and many prominent speakers appeared upon the rostra of the various cities during a winter season. Among the most notable lecturers who came to Iowa was Ralph Waldo Emerson, the profound New England essayist and poet.

It was mid-June in 1850 when Emerson first looked over the sweeping, boundless prairies of Iowa. After a visit to the Mammoth Cave, which inspired the famous essay on "Illusions", he had gone down the Ohio River to St. Louis and then up the Mississippi as far north as Galena, Illinois, whence he had resumed his homeward journey.

Like most travellers of his day, he was impressed, not by the thriving cities which had already firmly established themselves in the new country, but by the novelty of the scenery, "the raw bullion of nature." "In the Upper Mississippi", he wrote to his friend Thomas Carlyle, "you are always in a lake with many islands. 'The Far West' is the right name for these verdant deserts. On all the shores, interminable silent forest. If you land, prairie behind prairie, forest behind forest, sites of nations, no nations." The cities which he passed and at which he stepped ashore escaped his comment.

Not until December, 1855, did Emerson come to Iowa as a lecturer, one of twelve in the Davenport course of that season. Although the almost inconceivable extent of the new land still stirred his fancy, he now travelled more leisurely, and took occasion to look about him more closely. At the Le Claire House in Davenport he copied two rules of the hotel in his journal on December 31st: "No gentleman permitted to sit at the table without his coat", and "No gambling permitted in the house." He also made a note of the fact that he had "crossed the Mississippi on foot three times", the previous crossings having been made at St. Louis in January, 1853.

The entry is characteristically Emersonian. Even in the Far West gentlemen must not sit at table without their coats. Emerson noted the rule for his own guidance, said his son, humorously. And perhaps his Puritanic morality was gratified though he considered it remarkable that gambling was prohibited.

Crossing the Mississippi on foot, and that was about the only way in the winter of 1855, was an exciting experience. Any one who has walked over the ice at Davenport will agree that the undertaking has its thrills. But Emerson crossed in comparative safety. "Our river", said a Davenport paper a few days before his arrival, "is pretty substantially bridged and hundreds of people are crossing on the ice; teams are also beginning to cross over and the old Father is considered as brought into subjection

to the ice king until the warm weather shall set him loose. Before the river closed entirely several persons managed to fall through the ice, but all were rescued without further damage than getting thoroughly wet." Evidently Emerson was not among those who managed to fall through.

"Soft coal, which comes to Rock Island from about twelve miles, sells for sixteen cents a bushel; wood at six dollars per cord", continued the journal of the Concord householder; and the student of language could not refrain from noting peculiarities of speech. "They talk 'quarter-sections.' 'I will take a quarter-section of that pie.'"

The founder of Davenport seems to have interested the New England scholar. "Le Claire being a halfbreed of the Sacs and Foxes (and of French-Canadian)", he wrote, "had a right to a location of a square mile of land, and with a more than Indian sagacity of choosing his warpath, he chose his lot, one [part] above the rapids, and the other below the rapids, at Rock Island. He chose his lot thirty years ago, and now the *railroad to the Pacific runs directly through his log house*, which is occupied by the company for wood and other purposes. His property has risen to the value of five or six hundred thousand dollars. He is fifty-seven years old and weighs three hundred and eight pounds."

Antoine Le Claire's log house, which Emerson passed in his walks about Davenport, still stands, although it no longer occupies its original site and is

not to be seen in its original condition. After having been moved twice, it now stands at the intersection of Fifth and Pershing streets. The railroad which in 1855 ran directly through it did not, however, extend to the Pacific. That was only a popular dream. As a matter of fact it had hardly reached the capital of the State at Iowa City, and ten years elapsed before it was completed to Des Moines whither the capital had meanwhile been removed.

Emerson's journal records that he was announced as "the Celebrated Metaphysician" in Rock Island, while in Davenport he was described as "the Essayist and Poet." No existing Davenport or Rock Island papers advertised "the Essayist and Poet" or "the Celebrated Metaphysician." Emerson must have referred to handbills or placards, none of which have been preserved. The newspaper notice which proclaimed his coming, hidden in small type on an inside page, was not pretentious:

YOUNG MEN'S LITERARY ASSOCIATION

ANNUAL COURSE OF LECTURES

The Seventh lecture of the course will be delivered at the Congregational Church on Monday evening, December 31, by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Lecture will commence at 7½ o'clock.

Single Tickets 50 cents; for sale at the Book Stores and LeClaire House; Season Tickets \$2.

WM. HALL	} Committee
C. DELANO	
A. MORTON	

Although the New Year's eve lecture appears to have been well attended Emerson's auditors were not much impressed by his discourse if the newspaper review may be accepted as a basis for judging.

"RALPH WALDO EMERSON.— We were one of the many who had the pleasure of listening to this man of celebrity on Monday evening. Those who assert that Mr. Emerson is an orator are simply mistaken. That he writes and reasons well no one can doubt, but he is *no* orator. In that respect we were disappointed, but in others we found him much as we had anticipated.

"The first part of his lecture was by no means flattering to his reputation, but the latter portion redeemed it. That the audience appreciated the many good things that fell from his lips, was apparent in the silence with which they listened to his remarks.

"It would have been difficult to have given his address a name; indeed, we doubt if the author himself was not at a loss to give it an appropriate title. He treated laconically upon many subjects, and all of them he handled skilfully, leaving in his wake a train for thought which will come upon the mind at unexpected moments like a forgotten dream. His lecture, like Laocoön, should have been ascribed 'to those who think'."

Perhaps, after all, the lecture had no title. If the address went over the reporter's head, he nevertheless was sufficiently acute to comprehend the miscel-

laneous and mosaic character of Emerson's thought, and his opinion of Emerson's oratorical ability struck the keynote of the criticism which was to prevail in Iowa as long as Emerson lectured. At no time was Emerson highly regarded for his delivery. Although his Iowa engagements were comparatively numerous, he was not in demand because of his oratory; for he lacked the fire and dramatic ability of Wendell Phillips or John Gough, the great popular platform heroes of the fifties and sixties. His appeal was of an entirely different character. He did, in truth, address those who think, and thinking is neither a dramatic nor a spectacular process.

The small space devoted to a review of Emerson's 1855 Davenport lecture is not conclusive evidence that his audience did not enjoy and appreciate what he said. Judging by the newspapers of that day, one would imagine that the whole duty of man was then politics, the whole duty of woman — silence. And the interest in front page advertisements, set in minute type, must have been exceedingly lively. Mere lectures were of little significance compared with politics.

The lecture in Davenport was Emerson's only appearance in Iowa in 1855. Although as early as 1853 there had been some discussion of an effort to secure him as a lecturer in Dubuque, it was apparently not until August, 1856, that he was definitely asked to speak there. But the Concord essayist came no

farther west than Illinois that season and it was not until after the Civil War that he again lectured in Iowa.

Despite the fact that in Davenport he had been regarded as "*no orator*", it was to Davenport that Emerson came first upon the occasion of his second Iowa visit. He had been engaged by the Associated Congress, the group of men sponsoring the lecture courses, to speak on "*Resources*" at Metropolitan Hall, Friday evening, January 19, 1866. "Considering that Mr. Emerson is quite as well and favorably known throughout this section as Bayard Taylor," said one Davenport newspaper, "and recollecting the crowded state of the Hall at the latter gentleman's lecture, some time ago, it seems really useless for us to say a word in his favor."

The paper which ten years before had announced his coming only in a formal advertisement this time said: "There will be an opportunity tonight to hear a lecture of the first order of merit . . . As a thorough scholar and pronounced thinker, Ralph Waldo Emerson occupies an eminent position in this country. His published lectures are among the most valued contributions to American literature." This announcement, too, predicted that the lecture on "*Resources*" would be well patronized.

Unfortunately, the audience was not of the proportions predicted. The weather was very inclement. Said the Davenport *Gazette* on January 20, 1866: "A large number of our citizens who had

anticipated a rich treat last evening in listening to the lecture of the distinguished essayist, R. W. Emerson, were, thanks to the intense cold and furious gale which made outdoors venturers almost heroic, grievously disappointed. A few — about four score — braved the frost and blast, and with all the interest possible in a hall freezingly cold and amid the continual clatter and banging of windows and doors, heard and were amply repaid for the effort. Resources — in the abstract and concrete — formed the subject of the lecture, which was, of course, filled with the deepest thought and most happy illustration. We regret that the hall was not filled, as it would have been had the weather been at all favorable. That the hall was so miserably warmed was highly discreditable and deserving of severest censure.”

The Davenport *Democrat* agreed that “a more inauspicious night could not have been selected for Mr. Emerson’s lecture than the last one. In addition to the most intense cold, the wind was furious, and the air filled with snow. Yet, in spite of these obstacles, some sixty or seventy persons assembled at the hall, a third of whom were ladies, and the renowned lecturer began his discourse. The windows and doors rattled incessantly, but in spite of the noise Mr. Emerson’s voice was sufficiently powerful to be heard distinctly in all parts of the hall. It requires but little genius to interest an audience on a very interesting subject, but to interest it with

abstract facts, and theories, is quite another matter. In the latter, however, Mr. Emerson succeeded to perfection, and notwithstanding the cold, scarcely an eye was diverted from the speaker during the whole discourse." But with respect to the indifferent manner in which the hall was heated, the *Democrat* took issue with the *Gazette*. "The furnaces were kept in full blast to the close of the lecture. The fault was in the atmosphere, and not with the managers of the hall."

Only a handful of people ventured out to hear the lecture, yet the lecturer was there, and may have travelled many difficult miles to meet his engagement. Speaking under such circumstances was not easy, yet he was distinctly heard. In spite of distractions, a close interest was maintained, and this, too, in an abstract subject. It is a significant picture of the hardships which the scholar had to undergo, of the niche he filled as a lecturer — the speaker, not the orator, winning attention with intangible material. Even the little newspaper quarrel about the faulty heating is meaningful: generally the quarrel centered about the speaker, his political complexion deciding the editors' opinions of his worth. Emerson, by avoiding disputed questions of the hour, lost somewhat of the glamour of immediate popularity, but received a more unbiased and lasting approbation from those who had given their applause to the lecture heroes basking in the sunlight only for the day.

Not quite two years elapsed when Emerson's third lecture in Davenport was announced. "Ralph Waldo Emerson", said the Davenport *Democrat* of December 12, 1867, "occupies to-day the highest place in American literature; honored, admired, and studied by the master authors of England, Germany and France, and has consented to lecture here on the evening of Friday, December 20th, 1867."

The terrible cold and the inadequate heating of the hall upon the occasion of his former lecture were remembered, and the Young Men's Library Association thought it well to assure the public that this time Metropolitan Hall would be well warmed and comfortable. An additional furnace was to be installed, and a stove placed in the hall for use in case necessity should demand. This time Emerson's audience should be able to listen to him without physical distractions.

In spite of these extraordinary precautions to make the evening's entertainment and instruction a complete success, an uncontrollable element had not been taken into consideration — the lecturer himself. Emerson spoke from manuscript, which was not always in perfect order. Furthermore, the pages of his manuscript were merely distant signal fires to which he did not always directly proceed and which he sometimes entirely ignored. The result was occasionally irritating to those who sat near enough to watch his actions clearly and who unfortunately could not avoid seeing the details of his movements.

Emerson's lecture in Davenport, wrote one of these front-row people, "may have been about 'Success;' but the peculiar hop, skip, and jump style of the speaker, commencing a page and omitting half of it, or beginning in the middle, and, while reading the last part, turning over and laying aside two or three full pages, certainly failed to make clear either what success is or how to attain it."

The serene Amos B. Alcott, lecturing in Iowa in 1872, and viewing Emerson's literary efforts in retrospect, thought that his essays might be read either backward or forward. "Does it make any difference", he asked, "where one begins to look at the firmament? Are not the Heavens all, in each constellation, beautiful?" Doubtless every group of stars is in itself beautiful, yet if these groups were shifted hither and yon before our eyes with no accompanying explanation, a certain amount of amazement would certainly arise in the minds of all save the most philosophical.

The hall, however, was well warmed to the satisfaction of all present.

HUBERT H. HOELTJE

For Value Received

I had been cleaning out the old desk that was my father's. All of his private papers that were worth keeping, I had filed away — the rest lay in a pile to be burned. It was a miscellaneous assortment — tax receipts, cancelled checks, ancient memoranda of long forgotten transactions, newspaper clippings, old letters, tintypes of faces unknown to me, braided locks of hair, friendship cards adorned with a heart or a dove or a hand holding a sheaf of colored flowers and flowing script names of boys and girls he had known in his youth — in fact all the accumulation of a lifetime that had been spent mainly on the frontier. He had laid them away to look at in the long winter evenings, and by and by had forgotten them. In the last pigeonhole were a few old checks, made payable to my father and signed by one of the wealthiest men in the community, but without hesitation I tore them across and put them in the waste-basket where they lay in mute witness of nearly half a century of friendship which death only had been able to mar and which had been consecrated by a pioneer experience that my father had related to me when I was about eighteen years old.

It was a bitterly cold day in January, and I had just returned home from Algona, whither I had gone to write an examination for a teacher's certificate.

I had been detained there for several days by a snow-storm which the old-timers asserted was the worst in forty years. Foreseeing that I was going to run short of money I had telephoned home for advice, as I knew no one in the town.

“Go to the Kossuth County Bank”, my father had said, “and ask for Lew Smith. Tell him who you are and he will let you have what you need.”

I had obeyed him and, seeing an elderly man standing at the cashier’s wicket, asked if he were Mr. Smith. Being somewhat self-conscious owing to my youth and inexperience, I fancied he spoke rather gruffly in answer to my inquiry.

“Mr. Smith is engaged in an important conference and can not be disturbed”, he said. “I will attend to your business for you.”

As I timidly explained my errand he asked, “Who is your father? J. E. Stone? Hm, known your father for forty years and loaned him money many a time. I can attend to the matter as well as Mr. Smith. How much do you want? Four dollars? Here it is. Good day.”

The next morning a blizzard was raging that did not subside until Saturday. The wires were down and there was no information to be had concerning the probable arrival of the train, so we prospective passengers were obliged to wait in the station all day. It was a mile up town to the nearest lunch counter, and we did not dare leave the immediate vicinity lest the train should arrive in our absence.

If a kind-hearted housewife had not obligingly made us some thick meat sandwiches and a pot of hot coffee we should have had nothing to eat. Every one was cross and tired, and travelling men loudly berated the elements and things in general — sentiments we all fervently echoed. Another tiresome wait for a belated train ensued at the junction, and when I finally arrived home late at night I felt much inclined to dilate on the disagreeable trip.

“Well,” said father, “did you have any difficulty getting the money from Lew Smith?”

“I was not able to see him,” I replied, “but another old gentleman gave me the money. Who was he?”

“Oh, that must have been Joe Wadsworth. I know him well, in fact I have had a good many business dealings with him and Lew Smith too. You think you had quite a time on this trip, taking everything together, but it wasn't much in comparison with one I made to Algona soon after I came out here. It was in January of 'seventy-two. I had been batching here on section twelve since 'sixty-eight. Tip Thatcher had settled on this same section in August. His real name is Julius but nobody has ever called him that since he was a little shaver and ran about saying 'Tippecanoe and Tyler too' at the time William Henry Harrison ran for President. He and Mrs. Thatcher and three or four children were living about a half mile west of where they do now, in a little shanty that had only one room. Tip

didn't have much money and I didn't either. Work was scarce and I had reached hard bottom in both my pocketbook and the flour barrel.

"As it still wanted a good many weeks until spring, Tip and I planned to drive to Algona for provisions, though what we were going to buy them with, neither of us knew, for we had neither money nor credit. I cooked my last piece of salt pork for breakfast that morning and Mrs. Thatcher used the last of their flour. The pan of biscuits she baked was literally all she had in the house to eat.

"We made an early start — got off just at day-break. Tip had on a new overcoat his wife had made out of the blanket off their bed. It was some such day as this, right after a blizzard, and the sunlight on the snow dazzled our eyes so we could hardly see. It was bitterly cold and hard going. There was no road, only a trail and that was snowed over so that we had to get out of the sled and break the way through the drifts to save the horses and to keep from freezing. It must have been half past ten when we got to Algona — cold, hungry, and tired. Having blanketed the horses and fed them some hay and grain we had brought with us, we separated, agreeing to meet again at four o'clock.

"Well, I walked the streets all day without even a cup of coffee, for I didn't have a cent in my pockets. I tried to get some groceries on credit, but none of the merchants would sell anything on time without security. My land was no security, for there were

thousands of acres open to any man that wanted to settle on it, and it wasn't worth much anyway. Why this farm that old Mr. Loh homesteaded was sold twice that year; once for the sorriest looking team of horses I ever saw, and once for a fiddle that didn't have a full set of strings. It would be a long time until a crop could be harvested, and no one would take a mortgage on a crop, for there was no assurance that a homesteader would stay in the country long enough to put in a crop, much less harvest it. Finally, just as I had about reached the point of desperation, and had concluded that I had seen my homestead for the last time, I met a man who agreed to lend me two dollars and a half. He was hard up too and couldn't really afford to spare it, but sooner than see what little stock I had starve because I couldn't go back to it, he let me have that much. Seeing by the sun that it was just about four o'clock, I went to meet Tip. He was standing all humped up in front of the blacksmith shop and he looked pretty discouraged.

“ ‘Eth’, he said, ‘I’m up against it. I can’t get a cent of credit and I can’t borrow a dollar. I haven’t had a bite to eat since breakfast, and I’ve a family at home that’s hungrier than I am. I don’t know what to do.’

“I showed him my two dollars and a half and told him I guessed we wouldn’t starve while that lasted. We spent a quarter between us for something to eat, and with the rest we bought a bag of flour and a

piece of side pork and a little tea. We took the provisions home to Tip's, and I ate there while the food lasted. By the time it was gone, Tip had got ahold of some money on a trade; but I was out of luck and so I stayed there awhile longer. Do you know it was a year or more before I got that two dollars and a half paid off! Some of it I paid a quarter at a time, but I paid him interest on it too.

“We had pretty hard sledding during the winters that followed. That was in grasshopper times, and there were a good many occasions when I would have to go down the hill and say, ‘Well, Tip, I guess I’ll have to put my feet under your table for awhile’; or else he would show up at my cabin with the announcement, ‘Eth, my cupboard’s empty’, and I would take what I had down there. We never tried to settle up. Each one felt he owed the other a lot.”

In later years, whenever father and Mr. Thatcher had any financial transaction that involved a trivial sum, the kind of a deal in which one dislikes to accept payment, it was their custom to pay by check, which the other would gravely pocket. But the balances on my father's check stubs and bank book never exactly tallied. And here, at the end, I found three checks that he had never cashed, each many months old, made out for sums of ten dollars and less, payable to J. E. Stone and signed J. Thatcher. Because of his failing health, he had neglected to destroy them according to his custom.

EVANGELINE STONE COWMAN

Landscapes of Early Iowa

Iowa is a land of beauty. No traveller makes his summer outing by her prairie highways, north, south, east, or west, but returns to tell of wondrous fields, sunny pastures, groves, farm houses, and villages hardly elsewhere to be matched. So completely has the whole State passed beneath the plow, so quickly assumed the appearance of one vast farm, that one who thus studies the Iowa of to-day realizes with difficulty the strange picturesque wildness of fifty or sixty years ago when of farms, villages, cities, over the vastly greater part of this area there were none. For the benefit of those whose later experience makes them familiar with the present status only, it is worth while to describe the Iowa of that earlier day. For older men this is less needed; such have but to shut their eyes a moment till memory, all too willing, lifts up again the vision of past scenes and years.

It might perhaps be thought that the signs of human occupation form the chief distinguishing characteristic of the new physiognomy; but this is only partly true. Our human sympathy leads us to dwell on such features and to find in them a certain

[This description of primeval Iowa by the venerable botanist and president emeritus of the State University is reprinted in THE PALIMPSEST from *The Iowa Historical Record*, Vol. XI, where it was published in October, 1895.—THE EDITOR]

charm. But even were all the houses suddenly to disappear, even though the netted highways with right-angled meshes should dissolve and blend again unmarked into the adjoining fields, even then the prehistoric landscape would lack much of restoration.

Hill, valley, rock and stream are always of course the same, but these form only the background, the skeleton; the charm, as the character, lies in the details with which the larger features are evermore clothed and covered. In detail the modern landscape is very different from the old. Apart from inequality of surface, diversity in the appearance of a country is due largely to the distribution of forest and meadow. This distribution, ever picturesque, at least in eastern Iowa, remains to-day so far unchanged as to indicate the original conditions. True, very much of our Iowa woodland has been reduced to so-called farms or pasture-fields, but enough still remains to suggest the principal outlines of those landscapes which must have met the eye of the earliest civilized inhabitant. The differences lie deeper and affect alike the forest and the prairie.

The primeval woods were confined to two very dissimilar locations; to ridges of clay, sand, or rock and to flood-plains of streams, flats more or less wide, subject to overflow. All the richest, most fertile areas of the State were prairie. Sometimes the two poorer regions mentioned blent, or came

close together, especially since Iowa streams have a fashion of cutting through ridges and rocks; but not infrequently the streams were found shaded with only a fringe of their characteristic species while groves of forest trees covered isolated hilltops far away.

The primeval forests in these diverse localities were very different in character. The species were different. Down by the streams the wild plum, wild cherry, box-elder, soft maple, and elm made, with the grape and Virginia creeper, thickets almost or wholly impassable, with shade so dense that the ground beneath was absolutely bare. Where by the junction of two streams the flood-plain was widened with richer alluvial soil, walnuts, hackberries, and cottonwoods with an occasional bur-oak, gave to the woodland more the appearance of an eastern forest, and here and there on rocky banks were groves of hard maple rivalling those of Pennsylvania and Vermont. But on the clay ridges the white oak flourished sometimes to the exclusion of all else; while the most striking peculiarity of the Iowa upland forest was its openness. One could drive through it anywhere. To one following some long clay ridge the trees opened on every hand as in a royal park, and out past their clean white weathered boles on a summer day the emerald prairie gleamed and shone to the horizon's edge.

Even in the midst of these wooded hills there was many an open mead, an area perfectly bare of trees,

an acre, ten acres, or a section, it might be where no tree had ever stood. Here the ground received the drainage of the surrounding region, was therefore more moist and covered with denser grass. Around the margin of such a little meadow sometimes the hazel flourished with the blackberry, the plum, and the thorn. Instead of grass-grown mead, sometimes occurred a lake of greater or less extent; sometimes a lake filled full of aquatic or marsh-loving vegetation, a morass in which incautious quadrupeds were lost continually. Such morasses were not infrequent in the woods on the hilltops forty or fifty feet above the surrounding prairie.

Everywhere, however, grew the grass, rankest where the soil was strongest except, as noted, immediately along the banks of thicket-bordered streams. In many cases even the thicket was lacking by the stream and the grass grew down to the water's edge. The Cedar River in its upper courses, used to flow along mile after mile through open prairie with scarcely a bush to darken its pellucid waters, while any forest to which the stream might rightfully lay claim shaded the sandy hilltops sometimes miles away! The woods of to-day are all thickets where time has not sufficed in the struggle for place to give the stronger individuals such pre-eminence as effectually shuts out all smaller growth.

To the old regime or status contributed likewise the annual fires which swept all grass-grown regions, forest and prairie alike, keeping down the natural

increase of the forest so that only the hardiest individual under exceptional conditions managed to thrive at all. Occasionally where an "old settler" still preserves them may yet be seen some of the old oaks of Iowa's primeval woods. Such trees are now, owing to the absence of forest fires, wholly surrounded by "second growth" and do not show to the casual observer for what they really are; but if one be privileged to walk through such a surviving bit of woodland and can for the once imagine the smaller trees removed, and the ground beneath the remaining lofty white oaks carpeted with grass, he may even yet at least in imagination see the woods of Iowa when through their shades the Sacs and Foxes "pursued the panting deer."

But if the woodlands have thus undergone notable alterations hardly less remarkable to the eye of the careful observer are the changes to which the simple prairie has likewise been subjected. Here the modifications are of two sorts: in the relative moisture and in the flora entire. I am aware that it is rather hazardous to indulge in any positive assertions in reference to matters meteorological; still I believe it will be readily conceded that the prairies of Iowa are everywhere appreciably drier than they were prior to their cultivation. This we may attribute not to any special change in climate, but to the simple fact of universal drainage consequent upon the processes of agriculture. The prairies were wet, and in all low places stayed wet. Very rarely did

the surplus water pass off by anything like a ditch as now, but every valley was a bog, utterly impassable to man or beast. The waters did not seem to run at all, but gradually evaporated or sank to lower and lower strata. Our pioneers were great readers of *The Pilgrim's Progress* and thoroughly did they appreciate Bunyan's famous slough. They pronounced it "slew" and no one needed to go far to ascertain exactly the force of the dreaming tinker's figure. Over the oozy sloughs the sedges waved head-high, and into their treacherous depths horses, oxen, or even men ventured at peril of their lives.

In a state of nature every region has a flora of its own, every species holds in check another, and all persist from year to year, from century to century, in a state of trembling equilibrium. The slightest interruption produces an immediate effect, starts a readjustment. What then must have been the effect when the ploughshare overturned thousands of acres in a single day. The whole flora of the prairie went down to rise no more, to give place to plants of man's selecting and to weeds.

The original prairie flora included species comparatively few; only such as could endure an annual conflagration found a place. Plants suited for such conditions are either those having perennial subterranean stems and roots, or annuals whose seeds are in some way protected from the action of the fire. Most prairie plants were of the class first

named. In the lowlands, under the general name of slough grass, sedges covered thousands of acres with a mantle of deepest green, whose lustrous sheen went waving in the breath of summer like the rolling of the tropic sea; on the highlands "upland prairie grass" offered in softer tints an equally attractive picture. Here too flourished the red-root (*Amorpha canescens*) with leaden foliage and purple flowers, pest of the ploughman; and the wild rose blushed unseen. In moister meadows the *Habenaria*, the green-fringed orchid, waved its creamy spikes and the wild lilies tossed their fiery cups. Everywhere *Lobelias* sprang and in the swamps wild parsnip stood in forests and hemlock filled the air with odors rank. Later in the year the composites took the field completely. The sunflowers spread their cloth of gold, the torches of *Liatris* flared, the compass plant marked with edge-set leaves the meridian of the prairie and lifted its tall stems distilling resin. In fact one can hardly imagine anything more richly beautiful than an Iowa prairie in full bloom under the summer sun. Only the fertile pastures of the Alps can show such wealth of color and these by their scant dimensions hardly offer a comparison.

Against the invasion of foreign plants the native species formed efficient barrier, but once disturbed, the charm was broken and hosts of alien species occupied the ground. For instance blue-grass, now so common, seems at the outset to have been wholly lacking. It can endure the plough; not so our native

grasses. It will even drive out most other weeds and as we know has overrun the State. The plantain came with the pioneers and the dandelion followed shortly after; although as late as 1854 there were no dandelions in some of our eastern counties, and surely none farther west. In the year mentioned people sent to Pennsylvania for dandelion seed! The cocklebur was unknown and ragweeds confined to narrow limits. The flora of the prairies has been wholly changed.

Since the characteristic animals of a region also lend character to its landscapes, a word or two as to faunal changes may not perhaps be out of place. Changes in the animal world are of course even more radical than those seen in the world of plants. Deer that were once abundant are entirely gone and many a smaller species is quite extinct. Even the avian fauna, if students tell us rightly, has been more or less modified by the inrush of civilized man. The prairie-hens were a most common bird over the whole prairie. All day long you could hear the rustling of their wings, and in the winter mornings their trumpeting filled the State with strains of more than martial music. Mating took place in early spring and every old resident must remember the abundant eggs with which the prairies were once strewn. The prairie fires which should have taken place in autumn sometimes were delayed and did not come until the grass was dry enough again to burn in the following spring. Often before the fires

would come the prairie-hens had made their nests. The birds all flew before the fiery storm and after the blaze had passed many a nest lay white with ruined eggs, conspicuous upon the blackened plain.

Even parrots once enlivened the groves and meadows of our southern counties. Great flocks settled in spring on leafless trees and lit them up with the colors of the rainbow, easy mark, alas! for every idle vagabond with wit enough to carry a gun.

Twice in the year were the landscapes of Iowa glorious with a beauty they can show no more: in summer, when as described the whole earth was one parterre in which nature displayed her maximum variety of vegetation, the attainment of unnumbered ages; and in autumn, when that same vegetation, the frost-cured harvest of the year, went down in general conflagration. After a few killing frosts came then as now the delightful sunny weather which passes on to Indian summer, and the prairies became perfectly dry. Then came the fires. Where they started or to what end no one seemed to know. Various were the explanations offered. It was said the Indians lit the fires to set the great game in motion. Some thought the fires were started by the careless habit of the passing hunter. A better explanation lay in the fact that fire was needed to make clean the way for next year's crop of grass. At any rate no one seemed to care much whether the prairie burned or not and everywhere precautions — back-firing and ploughing — were taken to protect the pioneer's stack-yards.

Fires were expected and people were on the look-out for them every night. Sometimes their coming was announced by smoke which filled the air by day with filmy haze, and at evening rolled in cloudy masses down the low watersheds of the plain. More frequently by night a pale red tint appeared along the horizon's edge, a light reflected, as from the sky to-day comes to the traveller the glare of a distant electric-lighted city. If there were no wind the phenomena were repeated sometimes for days together before ever we saw the flames at all. We learned the first approach by the ever increasing smoke until at length along the sky-line of our landscape we saw the painted flames, like distant choppy waves on a sunrise-tinted sea; so slowly they came on, the very poetry of combustion, as tuft after tuft of tall blue-stem went up in lambent blaze. By morning everything had passed; the blackened prairie spread for miles, far as the eye could reach, the image and reality of desolation.

But if once upon a prairie fire the wind should rise, then came the storm, a fiery blizzard of destruction. The flames sped along the ground with marvellous rapidity, the air was burdened with ashes and flying sparks, and great smoke wreaths were rolled along in ever increasing volume, darkening the sun. Whole hillsides burned as by a single blaze, and down in the valleys where the grass was high the flames were higher still and the roar terrific. No living creature could stand before the storm.

Everything ran for life. Deer, led by wonderful instinct, sought the streams and pools; wolves dashed in terror past the settler's cabin, and the wild fox found his covert in the bank. Domestic animals shared the excitement of their wilder kin. Horses neighed, cattle bawled, and all ran to and fro striving to escape the rude confine which alone insured their safety. Of course, such a storm was but a moment in its passing, but grand in its on-come and retreat, while in its wake was left the same blackened prairie as before, only that everywhere the fires continued in unburned tufts and smouldering heaps, smoking by day and blazing up at night like fitful embers.

There are yet many among us to whom the whole history of our State is but life's memory. In the hearts of such, amid all the refinements of modern life, there rises often doubtless a longing unconfessed, a keen desire for the old-time freedom and the wild beauty of that earlier day when the State was new. That may not be; no more for them nor for the generations following. Let such rather congratulate themselves on the experience which is theirs. Once only in recorded time has nature turned over to the hands of civilized man a world in newness, freshness, absolute. Has destiny made us in any sense partakers of the gift unique, ours be the joy, ours too the peculiar responsibility of use.

THOMAS H. MACBRIDE

Comment by the Editor

CULTURE IN EARLY IOWA

Writers of fiction have exploited the sturdy, uncouth, rural settler of the West until the term "pioneer" has acquired a connotation of rusticity, loneliness, drudgery, and unsophistication to the exclusion of the other equally prevalent characteristics of piety, literacy and a yearning for education, cheerfulness, hospitality, and social activity that rivalled the Old South. The wonder of the virgin prairie — a garden of flowers in the summer, a spectacular conflagration in the autumn, and a desert of snow in the winter — has so dominated the imagination of poets and novelists that the character and life of the pioneers have been reconstructed in harmony with the picturesque setting.

Since the days of Marquette and the fur traders, the prairies of Iowa have been far famed. It was the sight of the billowy sea of grass and flowers, not the busy commonplace cities, that filled the mind and memory of the traveller who visited Iowa during the fabulous years before the Civil War. Emerson had eyes only for the "verdant deserts" of Iowa in 1855; and another eastern gentleman, who was surprised to find himself in the heart of civilization at Dubuque, Davenport, Muscatine, Burlington, or

Keokuk in 1856, was spellbound by the prairie, which looked to him "like a land of enchantment where the fairies might reside", a veritable "vale of Tempe, on a huge and colossal scale." The prairie tradition still persists.

While the literature of Iowa has been redolent of the prairie and agriculture, it has not been so representative of the less picturesque but more influential urban life of the Commonwealth. In the middle fifties, as ever, business, political, and intellectual interests centered in the cities. And Iowa cities were just as distinctive and conventional as the cities of the East — given to commerce, active in politics, occupied with social amenities, and striving for culture. Life in urban Iowa was energetic, comfortable, and refined. Newspapers flourished, books and magazines were widely read, libraries were established, churches grew, and every place of consequence aspired to have a college. Winter lecture courses, the absence of which was considered "a reproach to any progressive town of the West", afforded intellectual communion with the most brilliant minds of the nation. And the lecturers varied as widely as Mark Twain and Henry Ward Beecher. Lyceums and literary societies were deemed of so much importance in 1858 that their organization was regulated by law. There were fairs and festivals, musical and dramatic entertainments. Gentlemen, brisk and alert despite their boots and beards, and ladies, beautiful and graceful in crinoline, danced

the stately quadrille. To a correspondent of the New York *Tribune* in 1854, the progressive legislation in Iowa indicated that the founders of the Commonwealth were unusually wise, just, and humane. The Iowans appeared to have recently left the East "with the last *Harper* or *Putnam* in their pocket, the last *Tribune* in their hand, the last fashion on their heads and shoulders, and the last reform in their hearts", though the men seemed "a little more civil and genteel" and the women "ruffled rich brocades, or flitted in lawns as natural as life."

Maybe life in pioneer Iowa was not as crude and forlorn as the writers assume.

J. E. B.

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