

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.