

Squatter Settlements

Settlements trickling into the Iowa country in 1833 pictured a process and a movement rather than dramatic events and episodes. Great land companies did not lead the settlers to this region as in the early peopling of Ohio. In headlong rush the immigration did not compare with that of the Forty-niners sixteen years later. Lead and lands rather than gold discoveries impelled the Iowa advance. And, as on so many frontiers, the farmers and miners outran the treaty makers and the government surveyors.

When John Whitaker in May returned to his cabin, which he had already built in the present Lee County on the Skunk River, there were only two or three cabins near old Fort Madison. Peter Williams the next month returned to occupy his cabin built some time before. Later John H. Knapp and Nathaniel Knapp and a few others "moved" into Lee County from the Illinois side. Farther south James Bartlett and his family were landed at Keokuk by the steamboat *Warrior*. The building of cabins, clearing timber, staking claims, and planting crops make a sparse record of these scattered settlements.

Flint Hills — and more likely “Shokokon”, its Indian name — was more current on the Mississippi than was the name “Burlington”. Straggling settlers who penetrated the Flint Hills area perhaps did not even know the older Burlington in Vermont. The spot was one profitable in Indian trade, and the graves, root-house, canoes, and the trinkets suspended from trees attracted the attention of the early white invaders. An even longer and more respectful look could be given to the grave of the half-breed Maurice Blondeau surrounded by paling and marked by the sacred emblem of a cross.

Amasa Doolittle, Simpson S. White, and Morton McCarver, a triumvirate of brothers-in-law, had invaded the Iowa side and then retreated. Others likewise had before June 1, 1833, the date of Indian evacuation, made furtive explorations of the hills and prairies and had even staked out their claims. Bolder intruders brought their stock across, built some cabins, and sowed some seed.

News of a coming military raid sent many of these farmers back across the river. Fifteen soldiers commanded by Lieutenant John R. B. Gardenier came to the scene to tear down and to burn the cabins. The epithets applied to these troops by the dispossessed settlers may be left to imagination. Solomon Perkins's cabin, built on a

"stepped off" claim five miles away, escaped destruction. White returned immediately and resumed the building of his rail cabin.

Day after day vanquished settlers waited for June 1st when the real settlement could start. Canoes and flatboats pushed across the Mississippi with men and families. At least twenty-five heads of families constituted the spray of the waves of immigration of later years. Dr. William R. Ross selected a claim and returned to Quincy. There he employed two men to accompany his father and to build a cabin on this claim. His assortment of dry goods, groceries, drugs, medicines, and household goods was landed by a steamboat at Flint Hills in August. Later arrived another cargo of goods brought in by Jeremiah Smith.

Newcomers brought tidings from the east as well as names of persons planning to "settle" west of the Mississippi. Claims, cabins, immigration, roads, ferries, the state of the weather, surveying — rather than Indian dangers — made up the every-day talk of these settler folk. Wolf hunts were common and one of Isaac Crenshaw's dogs single-mouthed captured and killed three. The country, said one settler, was "without Law or Gospel". With attractive ladies at Flint Hills and attracted young men, "how could the nuptials be

performed?" Doctor Ross and Matilda Morgan answered the question when a flatboat carried them and a wedding party to the other side. Illinois furnished the license and the ceremony. At a celebration fifty years later the couple recalled the sheltering sycamore tree and the flatboat bridal party of that December 3rd.

The axe, the plow, the compass and chain — rather than guns — were the conquering implements on this frontier. The ferry moved back and forth and saws and axes transformed oak trees into cabins. The stakes and chains of surveyors marked valleys and prairies. Dr. Ross built a cabin and a schoolhouse on his claim. In the fall, aided by Doolittle and Benjamin Tucker, he platted the region and laid out a townsite. A petition was sent by Dr. Ross for a post office at Flint Hills.

A hard winter ushered out the year and closed the navigation on the Mississippi. But in the various finished cabins the log fires radiated comfort. Visits with friendly Indians, if they had then been recorded, would have furnished later generations with entertainment, if not history, about the old "war skirmishes". In the fall the aged father of Dr. Ross, a Virginian and a veteran of the Revolutionary War, died a victim of chills and fever.

Work and hardships rather than the native

charms of the region are accorded notice. The pioneers, wrote one of them, were "frequently without bread or meat, only such food as the God of Nature supplied the country bountifully with, wild honey, venison, fish and vegetables". One wonders whether the boarders at Doolittle's boarding-house would have preferred the bass, shell-fish, and clams of the Pilgrims at Plymouth nearly two centuries earlier.

Farther upstream another advance was made. From Rock Island, Major George Davenport sent in the summer a man named Farnham with two helpers to erect a log trading house at "Sandstone Bluffs" or "Grindstone Bluffs" — later renamed Bloomington, and then Muscatine. There a stock of goods was installed and for a time Indian trade was more important than surveying, building, or sowing seed.

But other cabins rose in the present county of Scott. In the spring "Captain" Benjamin W. Clark, a Virginian, came to the right bank of the Mississippi to settle on the site of Buffalo, where he operated a ferry. As a soldier he had served with Major Henry Dodge's United States Rangers on the western frontier. He is said to have planted the first orchard in Scott County. At Buffalo he built a sawmill and a hotel. In another part of the county Roswell H. Spencer built in the

fall another cabin on the river bank to become a lonely but permanent settler.

Continued thrusts of pioneer miners had given a population of about two thousand for the Dubuque area in this year. Sprawling shanties and cabins sheltered the miners. Furnaces and smelters continued the processes of the shovels and picks. Rude stores, gambling houses, and saloons — the ever present marks of a miners' frontier — ministered to the wants, if not the needs, of the miners.

In January a raid of troops from Prairie du Chien under Lieutenant E. F. Covington swooped upon the settlements for a second time. In this rout many miners fled across the river and the troops took shelter in some of the cabins. Some houses were pulled down and miners' wagons torn to pieces. From Galena the dispossessed miners looked in sullen wrath at this conquest of the army of the United States.

But more deadly was the attack from the Asiatic cholera whose first victim was a man named Fox. Then James Firth, a blacksmith, was struck down. A pall overhung the settlements, blighting the business of the stores and mines. Men fled from such scenes and others on the way to the mines turned back in terror. Doctors Allen Hill and John Stoddard stoutly remained on duty to minis-

ter to the sick and dying. About fifty deaths were recorded before the disease had run its course.

By June John P. Sheldon arrived with orders from Washington. He was ready to grant permits and licenses to miners and smelters. Plats two hundred yards square could be granted at a fixed amount of lead to be given the government. This indicated that the dangers from military raids were over. It meant a new era of more settlers, trade, furnaces, stores, and the expansion of mining camps.

Many rough aspects of these mining districts have faded from record and memory. A tragic figure was Captain Allenwrath, a British army officer. After his arrival at the mines he became in turn a recluse, a hermit, an outcast, a victim of drink, and finally of a pauper's death. A much briefer scene was the whipping given by "Miss S." to a man until he consented to give back her watch. A brawl on a Christmas eve and the fatal stabbing of Dickinson, a saloon keeper, are remembered out of many forgotten tragedies at Dubuque a hundred years ago.

Already pioneers were exhorting men to better conduct. In August Aratus Kent preached in an unfurnished log cabin of Ezekial Lockwood. From a box pulpit a sermon was delivered before, and perhaps at, rough miners seated on rough

boards. In other cabins miners acquainted with treasures on earth listened to the Reverend Barton Randle and Father McMahon, whose sermons dealt with the treasures of another world.

Weekly mails between Galena and Davenport carried by George O. Karrick were deposited in a soap box in the store of Milo H. Prentice. To some, the letters in this rude box might convey hope, to others sorrow, or, there might be tidings of success or failure. A raft of lumber was piloted to Dubuque in the fall and the whole cargo was sold in one day. Steamboats nosed their way into Galena and Dubuque to bring cargoes of goods from Saint Louis and news from the outside world. In turn Dubuque was paying its tribute of thousands of pounds of lead to the southern Mississippi River ports.

These little deposits of settlement came in 1833. But soon other and higher tides of settlement were to come, to rush over and beyond, and to leave a deeper layer of population drift.

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