

Iowa in 1835

A hundred years ago the area that now constitutes the State of Iowa was a prairie wilderness. Indeed, the name Iowa had not yet been applied to this territory or any part of it. The country between the Mississippi and Missouri rivers was known only by the Indians and fur traders. The inhabitants of the scattered settlements along the Mississippi may have been looking west, but their vision extended only a few miles. No accurate information about the geography of the interior was available. To be sure the eastern and western borders had been explored years before and the general course of the principal rivers was known; but the land had not been carefully mapped. Sometimes even Indian guides lost their way.

During the summer of 1835 Lieutenant Colonel Stephen Watts Kearny was ordered to conduct a military expedition through this region for the purpose of learning more about it. Fifteen years earlier, Kearny had marched from the vicinity of Council Bluffs to Fort St. Anthony near the present city of Minneapolis. The northwestern section of the present State was therefore somewhat familiar to him. Now he was instructed to proceed

up the Des Moines Valley with three companies of dragoons from his newly established quarters called Fort Des Moines on the site of the present town of Montrose. It was expected that the expedition would prove disciplinary and instructive to soldiers weary of barracks life as well as productive of valuable information about the country.

Turning northeast just below the junction of the Boone with the Des Moines River, Kearny marched to Wabasha's village on the Mississippi where he conferred with the Sioux, and thence proceeded westward to the Des Moines, returning to his post along the banks of that stream. The dragoons departed on June 7, 1835, and returned to Fort Des Moines on August 19th, after an arduous but successful tour of eleven hundred miles over the unexplored prairies of the interior.

Accompanying Kearny on this expedition was Albert Miller Lea, a young dragoon lieutenant. Lea kept complete notes on the journey, upon the basis of which he drafted a map of the country traversed by the expedition of 1835. An Iowan of 1935 would scarcely recognize Iowa as it appeared on Lea's map a century ago. Nearly all the political lines were the boundaries of tracts described in Indian treaties. The forty-mile wide Neutral Ground extended from the Mississippi to the Des Moines River across the northern part of

the present State. South of that lay the Black Hawk Purchase. Instead of drawing the boundary line between Dubuque and Des Moines counties due west from the foot of Rock Island, as prescribed by law, Lea drew it to the "nearest point on the Red Cedar of the Ioway, forty miles from the Mississippi" (near Cedar Bluff in Cedar County). The Keokuk Reserve divided Des Moines County almost in two. The southern boundary of the Iowa District, as Lea labelled the Black Hawk Purchase, was formed by the northern boundary of Missouri and the Half-breed Tract. To the west were the unappropriated hunting grounds of the Indians.

The Half-breed Tract, located in what is now the southern tip of Lee County, had been set aside in 1824 "for the use of the half-breeds belonging to the Sock and Fox nations". The land was to continue as a part of the public domain, but this provision was removed in 1834 and all rights were vested in the half-breed residents. The Half-breed Tract had attracted a considerable number of white settlers, however, before the Black Hawk Purchase. These had not been disturbed by the government as long as their presence was not obnoxious to the half-breeds. Since this land had been offered for sale by 1835, the Half-breed Tract may be considered part of the Iowa District.

The exodus of the Indians from the Black Hawk Purchase was the signal for hundreds of settlers to stake out claims west of the Mississippi in 1833. The mineral region around present-day Dubuque attracted the heaviest initial influx: but settlements were made at other favorable places along the river. By 1835, however, the entire Black Hawk Purchase (comprising about 7500 square miles of land or over one-eighth of the present area of Iowa) contained less than ten thousand inhabitants. To-day a half dozen important cities — Dubuque, Clinton, Davenport, Muscatine, Burlington, and Fort Madison — are found within the original Black Hawk Purchase. Fort Madison, the smallest of these, had a population of 13,779 in 1930, compared with 10,531 living within the Black Hawk Purchase in 1836.

The first settlers found the land without a government of any kind. It took a murder, followed by an extralegal trial and execution, to cause the Federal government to attach the newly settled country to the Territory of Michigan on June 28, 1834, "for purposes of temporary government". On September 6, 1834, the legislature of the Territory of Michigan created two counties (Dubuque and Demoine) in the district west of the Mississippi, and at the same time constituted each county a township also (Julien and Flint Hill). All the

laws in force in Iowa County, Michigan Territory, were extended across the river.

By the summer of 1835 the squatter settlements along the Mississippi were becoming places of some importance. Lea mentioned Keokuk and Fort Des Moines in the Half-breed Tract. The strategic importance of Keokuk at the foot of the Lower Rapids was readily recognized while the good steamboat landing at Fort Des Moines, together with the rich farm lands of the interior, made that point a "fine site" for a town. In Des Moines County the straggling villages of Burlington, Fort Madison, and Davenport gave little promise of their future growth. Such names as Gibson's Ferry, Richland, Iowa, Throckmorton's Landing, and Clark's Ferry can not be found on a modern map of Iowa. With the exception of Dubuque and Peru in the mineral region, Dubuque County was even more sparsely settled — Bellevue and Parkhurst being the only towns recorded by Lea on his map.

Births, marriages, deaths; log raisings, camp meetings, wolf hunts, all these brought sparkle to the otherwise humdrum existence in the unkempt villages between Peru and Keokuk. Churches and Sunday schools were being organized. The Methodists had built the first church in Iowa at Dubuque in 1834. On August 15, 1835, Father

Samuel Mazzuchelli and his Catholic flock were laying the cornerstone of their church in Dubuque. The foundation of Congregationalism and Presbyterianism was being laid in Des Moines County by Asa Turner, and the Baptists were entrenching at what later became Danville. Typical of the hardy, self-reliant preacher on the frontier was Barton Cartwright, who plowed his fields during six days and preached on the seventh. "Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep" might well be said of such men as Cartwright and the circuit rider on the Iowa frontier.

Enterprising pioneers were harnessing the streams of the Iowa District: sawmills buzzed merrily at Sageville near Dubuque and on Flint Creek in Des Moines County. Levi Moffet and William Smith erected a dam and sawmill at Augusta on the Skunk River in 1835. John H. Knapp established a horse-mill for grinding corn and buckwheat at Fort Madison. A few frame buildings were in the process of construction, but the log cabin was still the symbol of the pioneer. Some of these cabins served as schools and churches; stores of merchandise were displayed in others. The first court held in southern Iowa convened in the cabin of William R. Ross in the spring of 1835. Truly the warp and woof of existence centered in the rude pioneer homes.

A polyglot population occupied the land west of the Mississippi. According to Lucius H. Langworthy, who had come to Dubuque as early as 1832, "every considerable nation of Europe and all the States of our Union, were duly represented. The German liberalism, the New England puritanism, and the Celtic nationalism mixed and mingled in all the elements of society." Other pioneers testified to substantially the same facts concerning the first settlers.

It was an English traveler, Charles Augustus Murray, who left one of the most graphic descriptions of the Iowa pioneers. Arriving at the foot of the Lower Rapids in 1835, Murray related: "This village of Keokuk is the lowest and most black-guard place that I have yet visited: its population is composed chiefly of the watermen who assist in loading and unloading the keel-boats, and in towing them up when the rapids are too strong for the steam-engines. They are a coarse and ferocious caricature of the London bargemen, and their chief occupation seems to consist in drinking, fighting, and gambling."

Passing on upstream, Murray was amazed at the "singularly bad judgment" in erecting Fort Des Moines on such a "low, unhealthy, and quite unimportant" site. He made little comment on Fort Armstrong.

Upon his arrival at Dubuque, Murray put up at the only tavern in town. He found the barroom "crowded with a parcel of blackguard noisy miners, from whom the most experienced and notorious blasphemers in Portsmouth or Wapping might have taken a lesson". Although exasperated by the lack of privacy afforded by the rough pioneer community, Murray must have enjoyed sitting "by the fireside watching the strange and rough-looking characters who successively entered to drink a glass of the nauseous dilution of alcohol, variously colored, according as they asked for brandy, whisky, or rum". When he retired to the barrack-like bedroom he congratulated himself on securing a bed to himself instead of sharing it with two or three drunkards.

Having visited the various mining towns about Dubuque, Murray was forced to conclude: "It certainly appears at first sight to be a strange anomaly in human nature, that at Dubuque, Galena, and other rising towns on the Mississippi, containing in proportion to their size as profligate, turbulent, and abandoned a population as any in the world, theft is almost unknown; and though dirks are frequently drawn, and pistols fired in savage and drunken brawls, by ruffians who regard neither the laws of God nor man, I do not believe that an instance of larceny or housebreak-

ing has occurred. So easily are money and food here obtained by labour, that it seems scarcely worth a man's while to steal."

Evidence is not lacking to prove the presence of many "hard-boiled" frontiersmen in the Iowa of 1835. The hanging of Patrick O'Connor at Dubuque in 1834 did not terminate lawlessness — the executioner himself fleeing from the lead mines to escape the wrath of O'Connor's friends. The tragic shooting of Woodbury Massey in a claim dispute, the murder of John O'Mara by Patrick Brennan while "sky-larking", the tar and feathering and subsequent deportation of a wife-beater, are classic illustrations of Dubuque one hundred years ago. It was in 1835, too, that the Dubuque sheriff administered thirty-nine lashes on the bare back of a common thief.

But such incidents were the exception, rather than the rule. The large majority of the squatters were sober, earnest, and hard working — intent on carving out a better niche in the Iowa District than had been afforded them back east. If we accept the word of Edward Langworthy, the Dubuque lead miners must have been paragons of "honesty, integrity, and high toned generosity".

Albert Miller Lea considered the population such as is "rarely to be found in our newly acquired territories". Since Lea visited a larger por-

tion of the Iowa District in 1835 than any other contemporary chronicler, and since in addition he had traveled extensively on the western frontier, his opinion can not be treated lightly. "With very few exceptions," Lea declared, "there is not a more orderly, industrious, active, pains-taking population west of the Alleghenies, than is this of the Iowa District. Those who have been accustomed to associate the name *Squatter* with the idea of idleness and recklessness, would be quite surprised to see the systematic manner in which everything is here conducted. For intelligence, I boldly assert that they are not surpassed, as a body, by an equal number of citizens of any country in the world."

But seven-eighths of what is now Iowa lay beyond the Iowa District and was inhabited by the Indians. The villages of Keokuk and Wapello were in the Keokuk Reserve, while Poweshiek's followers were still encamped on the banks of the Cedar River in the original Black Hawk Purchase. The combined population of the confederated tribesmen numbered about five thousand.

North of the Iowa District lay the Neutral Ground. This zone was expected to serve as a barrier between those implacable foes — the Sioux to the north and the Sauks and Foxes to the south. By the treaty of 1832 the Winnebago had agreed

to leave their homes in southwestern Wisconsin but it was not until September of 1835, that Chief White Ox and his band established a temporary village on the Red Cedar River. Three months later two hundred Winnebago were reported hunting in the same region. During the previous spring David Lowry, a Presbyterian missionary, opened a school on Yellow River but only six Winnebago children attended.

West of the Iowa District lay the lands of the Sauks and Foxes, extending westward to the watershed which divided the waters flowing into the Des Moines from those emptying into the Missouri. Most of this territory Lea marked unexplored, the dragoons having marched along the divide between the "Chacagua" (Skunk) and the Des Moines River almost to the Neutral Ground before turning to the northeast. Keokuk had established a village on the north bank of the Des Moines near an old trading post on what is the present site of Iowaville. Farther up the Des Moines near what is now Ottumwa stood the tattered village of Chief Appanoose and his Sauk followers. Both villages were visited by the dragoons on their summer tour of the prairies.

On the east bank of the Missouri in what is now southwestern Iowa, Lea placed the home of the Pottawattamies, Ottawas, and Chippeways. Al-

though their number was set at six thousand on Lea's map, only a handful arrived by the fall of 1835. Despite the migratory habits of the Indians, it is altogether likely that the red population of what is now Iowa equalled that of the white population in 1835.

The climate of Iowaland did not vary more widely than in similar latitudes east of the Appalachian Mountains. Lieutenant Lea considered the breeze from the "broad prairies almost as refreshing as that from the ocean." Although exempt from the raw easterly winds along the Atlantic seaboard, the traveler found the cold prairie blasts "sufficiently annoying" when the mercury stood at zero. Lea had known the prevailing southwest wind to remain constant for three successive weeks at Rock Island and had heard that it remained so during six weeks at Prairie du Chien.

Although the "salubriousness" of the climate varied according to locality, Lea pointed out that such common American diseases as "pulmonary consumption" were unknown in the Iowa District. He believed the marshy grounds along the Mississippi from the Des Moines to the Rock Island rapids would be conducive of "much bilious disease" although little compared with that in Missouri. Above Rock Island the country was as healthy as in the region of the Allegheny Mountains. "But

whether above or below the Upper Rapids," Lea asserted, "the country at a distance from the swamps of the Mississippi, is elevated, and is as healthy as any can be, where there is a free circulation of air, good water and rolling grounds; but where there is also much vegetable matter to decay. This evil is incident to all new countries; and the richer the country in point of soil, the greater is the evil; but it is one that is continually diminishing with the progress of cultivation."

Winter — a "dry, cold, and bracing" season, usually set in about the first of December and ended early in March. According to Lea the rivers were "bridged with ice; the snow is frequently deep enough to afford good sleighing, and it is considered the best season for travelling, by those who are able to bear exposure to a cold atmosphere." Pleasant weather was often enjoyed in southern Iowaland in mid-winter, and there was never enough snow, even as far north as Prairie du Chien, to interrupt travel.

Lea found spring anything but delightful. "It is a succession of rains, blows, and chills: and if the sun happen to shine, it does so gloomily, as if boding a coming storm. The whole country becomes saturated with water, the low lands are overflowed; the streams are swollen; and locomotion is rendered difficult except by water." Since

spring was a boon to waterways, the inhabitants of Iowaland had to take advantage of "the six weeks of rain, and fog, and wind that changes the freezing winter into the warm and genial summer." Lea believed the farmer would have to adapt himself to the variable weather in order to assure himself of crops worthy of the soil he cultivated.

The summer was sufficiently warm to produce a rapid growth of crops and yet was seldom "oppressively hot". When the expedition started, the grass was short and green. The air was fragrant with the smell of flowers, and the juice of wild strawberries reddened the hooves of the horses. During July the dragoons rode through grass six feet high, but seldom experienced excessive heat. Throughout the summer the appearance of the country was "gay and beautiful being clothed in grass, foliage, and flowers."

Lea considered autumn the most pleasant season of the year. "The heat of the summer is over by the middle of August", he declared, "and from that time till December, we have almost one continuous succession of bright clear delightful sunny days. Nothing can exceed the beauty of Summer and Autumn in this country, where, on one hand, we have the expansive prairie strewn with flowers still growing; and on the other, the forests

which skirt it, presenting all the varieties of colour incident to the fading foliage of a thousand different trees."

Wild game was abundant in 1835. Herds of buffalo roamed the prairies bordering the headwaters of the Des Moines, the Skunk, the Iowa, the Cedar, and their tributaries. Deer and elk stalked the prairie and bear shuffled through the woodlands. Smaller game — fox, beaver, muskrat, otter, badger, wolf, mink — were to be found everywhere. Prairie chickens and turkey strutted in the thickets while geese and ducks flew in myriads of long windrows across the sky. Pigeons and pelicans, sand cranes and grouse, songbirds of every hue and description, all lent color and gaiety to the Iowaland of a century ago.

The dragoons encountered several small herds of buffalo on their march to Wabasha's village in 1835. Two years previously Keokuk and his Sauk and Fox Indians had killed eighty on the headwaters of the Iowa. The shaggy monsters formed an important element of the red man's food supply and the unbroken prairies still furnished the buffalo with luscious grazing.

Seven black bears were seen by members of the Yellowstone expedition of 1825 near the mouth of the Big Sioux River. Ten years later Charles Augustus Murray joined a hunting party of

twenty men from Fort Crawford to hunt bear and other big game on the headwaters of the Turkey River. Unfortunately the hunters ran afoul of a party of Winnebago Indians who resented this unwelcome incursion into their domain in the Neutral Ground. By continually firing their guns and setting fire to the grass on the prairies, the Winnebago succeeded in driving the game away so that the white hunters got no bear.

The streams abounded with fish — pickerel, eel, catfish, pike, trout, and many other varieties. Reptiles glided quietly through the grass: the warning of the deadly rattlesnake was often heard. One night after pitching his tent, Lea found and killed four rattlesnakes within it. The next day he had a bath in a pool, occupied by mosquitoes so large that he pressed one in his journal, and kept it as "a specimen of the luxuriant growth of the plains".

But the beauties of this wild hinterland were as a closed book to the pioneers of 1835. They were more concerned with the arrival of such steamboats as the *Adventure*, the *Chian*, the *Dubuque*, the *Galenian*, the *Heroine*, the *Olive Branch*, and the *Warrior*. The great highway of commerce and communication that flowed by their door, not a trackless wilderness inhabited by roving bands of Indians, was the object of their regard.

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