

The Switzerland of Iowa

It is a widely prevalent belief among those who have never been in Iowa that our State is a monotonous plain entirely devoid of scenic beauty and worth-while interest.

It is true that its general surface is a great plain — a part of the prairie area which included nearly seven-eighths of Iowa and large parts of surrounding States — and it is a pity that somewhere within our limits there is not yet preserved a larger tract which would give even to the present as well as to coming generations some concept of the beauty and the splendor of the floral panorama which spread from border to border, displaying its maze of color and charm in never-ending variations in tint and shade from early spring until late autumn.

But this plain is broken here and there to give further attractive variety to the picture. True, we have no great mountain chains, the difference between the highest and lowest points in the State being scarcely 1200 feet; and we have no great water areas, though we have inviting lakes and streams whose attractiveness will fully return when, and if, the plans now being made for the

restoration of their natural purity are finally consummated.

But we have miniatures quite suggestive of these greater features, or possessing qualities of their own. Thus the hills and bluffs extending along the Missouri River from Hamburg to Sioux City, and culminating in the Joy Creek region near the Big Sioux, present combinations of prairie and forest in deep canyons and on towering domes and massive ridges — a picture both impressive and unique.

The valleys of the Des Moines, the Iowa, the Cedar, the Upper Iowa, and other tributaries of the Mississippi contain many beauty spots in which cliff and valley and forest and water combine to offer beauty and comfort to the visitor. This type culminates in the northeastern part, in what is known as the "Switzerland of Iowa", and within this rugged area there is no part which compares in varied interest with the vicinity of McGregor. Here we have an unusual combination of interests — scenic, historic, and scientific — and it has for years been the seat of the Wild Life School at McGregor, which has done so much to stimulate and develop interest in conservation, and particularly in the preservation of examples of our natural areas.

The area is a veritable treasury of historic

events. Here Marquette, coming down the Wisconsin River, first saw the land now called Iowa — an event which the neighboring town of Marquette commemorated by adopting his name; here Basil Giard received a land grant from the Spanish government of Louisiana, and later, when Louisiana was ceded to the United States, the title to this land was confirmed, one of the two oldest in Iowa; there, on the Wisconsin side of the great river is located Prairie du Chien, with its historic connections with Indian wars, for many years the great distributing point for all the Northwest, reminders of which still exist in the ancient warehouse, the old hotel, and the traces of Fort Crawford; here Lieutenant Pike stopped on his journey to the upper stretches of the Mississippi Valley, and the great bluff opposite the mouth of the Wisconsin still bears his name, now Pike's Hill, but for many years known as Pike's Peak; portions of this general area were included in the "Neutral Ground", established to separate the Sioux and eastern Iowa Indian tribes and check the ancient warfare between them; and here are the old military trails which remind us of the period when our government attempted to pacify the warring Indians. It is also rich in reminiscences of the experiences of the early pioneers and rivermen who first faced the uncertainties and the

dangers of a new and not always friendly region.

Nor is all the historic interest centered in the white man alone. There are here important records of the aboriginal race, not inscribed on clay tablets or parchment rolls, but written in the remarkable groups of mounds, many of them of the effigy type, the knowledge of which has been splendidly clarified through the researches of Dr. Charles R. Keyes of Cornell College.

Intimately connected with these human interests are those related to the natural history of the region which are generally included under the heads of geology and biology. A person interested in nature study or in scientific research can find abundant opportunities for the gratification of his needs in any of these fields.

Older geological history is well revealed in various sections, that at Pike's Hill showing four geological stages, beginning with the Cambrian St. Croix sandstone as the lowest member, while not far away the Pleistocene deposits may be studied in sections showing two drift sheets and loess. In addition to this there are exceptional opportunities for the study of physiographic problems.

In the biological field, specimens of our native fauna are present. Birds and insects are especially frequent, and land and freshwater mollusks

are quite abundant. All other groups of inland forms are also represented, though perhaps in lesser numbers.

The region is especially rich in plants, the varied topographic features offering a great variety of habitats. The swamps and lagoons and the sand-flats of the great valley; the wooded slopes and sheltered canyons; the varied cliffs and ledges; and the prairie openings which here and there break the continuity of the upland forests — all offer their quota of characteristic plants, imparting especial richness and fullness to the flora of the region.

This is, moreover, the meeting ground of the floras of the northeast, the southeast, and the west. Here the southerly swamp white oak and the lotus-lily barely invade the area, while the northerly white pine, white birch, and common juniper prosper, together with the pasque flower and other representatives of the westerly prairie flora.

Here are still preserved some of the plants which are now very rare in Iowa, such as the cardinal flower, the lady's slippers, the ostrich fern and others, and everywhere flowering plants, ferns, mosses, fungi, and lichens are especially abundant. This is, indeed, the botanist's paradise!

Nor are these the only outstanding advantages which the region offers. By no means the least of

them is its scenic wealth. Everywhere there are local gems to which verdant woods, brilliant flowers, rugged cliffs, rippling streams, and cooling springs contribute.

But there are also larger scenes which rival the finest in all the Mississippi Valley. There is no more magnificent view in Iowa than that which may be obtained from Pike's Hill. Here the majestic river has assisted in carving out a great valley, bordered by broken lines of hills and bluffs extending as far as the eye can reach. To the east lie the bluffs of the Wisconsin side, carpeted on their exposed sides with prairie, but below is the broad tributary valley of the Wisconsin, in the Wisconsin State Park, somber with the dark green of a heavy forest; on the Iowa side the almost continuous hills and bluffs have the dark green of their forest covering only rarely broken by clefts in the bluffs, or by small prairie openings; while the broad valley between shows the great river, closely crowding toward the Iowa side, with its wooded islands, its bayous and lagoons, and bordered on the east by the joint Mississippi and Wisconsin River sandy plain, on which in the distance may be seen the city of Prairie du Chien. The scene is marvelous and inspiring if viewed in the summer when the vegetation is fresh and green, but when the early autumn frosts have pro-

duced their color miracle, the bluffs are gorgeous in their raiment of autumn foliage! Nor does the region lose its inspirational power and value when the mantle of snow has reduced its color scheme to a uniform white. It is worth many miles of travel to view this scene at any season of the year!

The recreational possibilities of the region are also noteworthy. There are innumerable attractive spots for picnicking; many winding paths and delightful prospects lure the lovers of outdoors upon long hikes; the great river invites boating and water sports; and good roads lead in all directions.

Much of this region does not encourage economic development, but its natural beauties are a wonderful asset and should be preserved. This has been appreciated by local residents for many years. It gave inspiration to the establishment of the Wild Life School; it has resulted in the dedication of the local part of the Munn estate, including Pike's Hill, to the public as a wild life preserve; and it induced the Chapins to donate a smaller tract at McGregor for a similar purpose.

The Munn tract is now under the direct control of the government as a national preserve, but its supervision has been found difficult and inadequate. Some have proposed that the United States government should turn this over to the

State and that the preserve should be increased by the addition of more of the bluff area, thus making it one of the finest State parks and preserves in the Mississippi Valley. If this opportunity is offered, it should by all means be accepted and the tract placed under the control of the State Conservation Commission.

The greater area to be included offers little promise of economic development and it forms the very heart of the great scenic region of which it is a part. In any event it should not be at the mercy of the greed or self-interest of individuals, but should be consecrated to the service of the people of the State as a whole, serving as a great inspirational, educational, and recreational center, now and in the future.

If we can accomplish this and then, before it is too late, secure somewhere in the northwestern part of the State an adequate tract for the restoration and preservation of a bit of true prairie, we will have erected a monument in memory of our pioneer settlers which will ever keep before us an example of the natural conditions which attracted them and led them to lay the foundations for a great Commonwealth. These preserves should be dedicated to them.

Nor is the value of such tracts wholly sentimental. Their immediate value lies in two types of

service. First, they may serve as recreational centers to bring rest and wholesome pleasure, especially to those who can not travel great distances in search of these advantages. Secondly, they should become informational centers, not only to the scientist but to every citizen, where a better understanding of the world in which we live would be secured. For let us not forget that we grow our crops and carry on various activities under the very condition illustrated in such preserved tracts. Their study and understanding will lead us far toward a better use of our opportunities and the avoidance of the repetition or perpetuation of some of our costly past errors.

I have known the McGregor region for nearly half a century, and as the passing years slip into eternity its charm does not diminish — nay, it increases with the destruction of the many smaller areas of like interest, standing out all the more prominently because of their disappearance. Its chances for preservation are increased by the fact that so much of it promises little economically. Let us learn to know it, let us develop a full understanding of its many values — and then let us preserve it and insure its blessings for the people of the State before some reckless experimenter destroys much of its value under the pretext of “developing” its possibilities.

Northeastern Iowa contains many other points of interest which can only be mentioned here. Most of them can be reached by good roads. Clayton, Allamakee, and Winneshiek counties, with portions of the neighboring counties, are especially rich. The entire Mississippi River front offers majestic bluff scenery; the valley of the Upper Iowa presents a number of striking and beautiful scenic pictures, such as the balsam cliffs at Bluffton, the city park and Dunning Spring at Decorah, and the lower part of the deeply cut valley near New Albin; the view of Paradise Valley in Bixby State Park; the drive on Highway No. 9 along the high ridge east of Waukon and down the valley of Village Creek to Lansing; various points along Yellow River, notably at the Stone House and near its mouth; portions of the valleys of the Volga and of Turkey River, particularly in their lower courses; and many others. The ice caves of this region are worthy of special attention, particularly those in the Bixby State Park and at Decorah. At the outer fringe of this area, and within easy reach, is the Backbone State Park in Delaware County.

The Switzerland of Iowa is worthy not only of the attention of the people of Iowa but of outside visitors as well.

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