

# THE PALIMPSEST

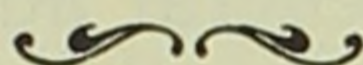
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VOL. XIX

ISSUED IN DECEMBER 1938

NO. 12

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## Homespun Amusements

Hoot! Away, despair,  
Never think of sorrow,  
The darkest day may wear,  
The brightest face to-morrow.

It was with such lilting verses that Miller, Yale, and Howes informed readers of the *Iowa News* that the American Arena Company would arrive at Dubuque on September 5th to entertain residents of the mineral region. Described as a "traveling world of wonders", this colorful circus had already performed for citizens of Farmington, West Point, Fort Madison, Augusta, Burlington, Wapello, Bloomington, Rockingham, Davenport, and Bellevue. The owners told Iowans their show was "unexcelled by any in the world" and invited gentlemen to pay a visit and be convinced. The spacious arena, with its upper tier of seats reserved for the ladies, was arranged in a "most beautiful style" and could accommodate one thousand spectators. The horses were unsurpassed in



"agility, muscle, and sagacity" and the distinguished and daring riders included six-year-old Master Howes. Jack May, the "humorous and facetious" clown, was also a notable member of the troupe. A military band played during the performance. The general admission for all this was fifty cents.

The American Arena Company circus was the principal entertainment attraction in the Black Hawk Purchase in 1838. Except for an occasional steamboat excursion (the *Brazil* carried a party to the Falls of St. Anthony), the Iowa pioneers had little imported diversion. Talking pictures were unknown. The proud possessor of a daguerreotype portrait would have been incredulous of modern candid photography. The motor boat, the automobile, and the airplane were reserved for future generations. Baseball, football, basketball, tennis, and golf were to become commonplace entertainment for the sons or grandsons of the Territorial pioneers. The simple amusements of 1838 were commonly homespun and fitted into everyday affairs.

The resourceful pioneers utilized every element of their social life as a vehicle for fun. Log raisings were usually accompanied by feasting and drinking, interspersed with wrestling, foot racing, and feats of strength. Housewarmings were gen-



erally featured by dancing and games. Quilting bees, paring bees, husking bees, all offered an opportunity for fun and frolic. Spelling bees and temperance lectures were held in schools or churches. A literary association at Dubuque afforded both intellectual stimulation and amusement. In the same community Azor Richardson conducted a singing school in the Methodist Chapel to "cultivate the science of Sacred Music". In his opinion, "if those who now compose the choir in our church, would devote a few evenings in cultivating their musical talent, they would render that part of the worship more interesting." The Territorial militia offered social advantages apart from the more serious military duties. Births, marriages, and deaths afforded occasions for social intercourse.

Hunting and fishing supplied food for the family larder as well as sport for local Nimrods. The streams were full of the best fish, while prairie and forest teemed with wild game. The editor of the *Iowa News* mentioned seeing a quantity of pike, twelve to eighteen inches in length, that had been caught with a seine. There were only a few sunfish and perch in the catch. On another occasion he noticed a flock of wild pigeons light on the land office building. "Whether they are old settlers and called to obtain certificates, we are not aware,



but this fact we feel assured of, — if they are, their lots have been 'jumped', and a second application can be made only at the peril of their lives."

When the *Missouri Republican* editor boasted that some Saint Louis hunters had bagged 131 grouse in August, he was upbraided by the *Iowa Territorial Gazette* for condoning grouse shooting before September 1st. "It's 'flat burglary'," the Burlington editor declared. "No real sportsman will kill a grouse till the first of September! Grouse are not now, or at least at the date of the hunt referred to, in bagging order — they are too young, and poor. Sportsmen should regard these things — poachers will not. We, an humble member, but an ardent one, of the Shooting Club, would as soon think of 'fishing for trout in a peculiar stream,' as of killing grouse at this time of day. Three weeks hence, and if any of the St. Louis boys have conceit in their skill, let them come up to Iowa, and they will learn a lesson in the art of bird bagging."

In September the *Iowa News* observed that several "sporting fellows" from the Dubuque-Belleuve region intended to hunt elk and buffalo at the headwaters of the Maquoketa and Turkey rivers where the game was said to be plentiful. One pioneer farmer near Dubuque caught a young elk and tamed it. Misfortune stalked two duck hunters at



Davenport. The men were brothers and had only recently arrived from Ohio. While hunting in the neighborhood of the Wapsipinicon one shot a duck in a small pond and went in search of it. According to the *Iowa Sun*, "he became entangled in the grass and weeds, and called on his brother for help, who immediately rushed into the pond, became also entangled, and before assistance could arrive they were both drowned."

The *Iowa News* chronicled a hunting episode less serious in its consequences. "Two sons of Hibernia being a ducking, Pat discovers a large bed of ducks close by the shore. After having his piece levelled for about five minutes, his companion asked him why he didn't fire? Pat replied — 'By zounds, I can never get aim at one, but there's another swims right between him and me.' "

Sleigh-riding and skating were popular on the frontier, the frozen Mississippi and its tributaries often providing splendid glassy highways. A Dubuque editor was delighted when five inches of snow fell early in November. "The upper part of our harbor is frozen over," he declared, "and the boys are enjoying the fine sport of skating." At Burlington the editor grumbled as others joyously sped past his shop. "The sleighing, we take it, is now very good, but we have not enjoyed it, having neither horse, sleigh, or leisure. Indeed, we have



not had a real old-fashioned sleigh-ride for many a day, and the last we enjoyed, we *took on foot!*"

Dancing was probably the most popular form of amusement, for that brought men and women together. Every community could boast of at least one fiddler who put plenty of swing in the strains of the "Irish Washerwoman", "Old Dan Tucker", and "Pop Goes the Weasel". The Chicago *Democrat* chronicled the anniversary celebration of the opening of the first tavern at Blue Ruin, Iowa, on September 10th. All the young people within twenty miles came to the number of forty-two gentlemen and six ladies. They danced "amid the utmost unanimity and hilarity" from six P. M. to six A. M. The fiddler was delighted that there was a lady for each of the six sets. After putting a proper amount of rosin on his bow and tuning his fiddle, Old Cuffee gave the following order for the evening:

"The gentlemen will have so much kindness as to parade themselves in companies of seven along the hall and take their numbers, remembering that the one in each set who gets the first number will dance with the lady first. The gentlemen must remember that the main object of dancing is to encourage the polite arts; therefore, I shall allow fifteen sets danced this night. Fourteen sets will be danced by numbers so that each gentleman can



dance twice with the lady of his set. But the fifteenth will be the rubber and is designed to encourage good breeding. So the gentleman who '*walks into the affections*' of the lady best in the fourteen, shall have her the fifteenth dance. Now, gentlemen, remember the rubber." The advice had its effect, the dancers pairing into the "Double Shuffles" and "Break Downs" in a most "genteel" manner.

A marriage was always the signal for general rejoicing; feasting, drinking, and dancing being the order of the day. Since the men greatly outnumbered the women, a marriageable girl usually had a corps of suitors. At Ever Green Grove on the Icy Fork of the Yellow River the young men assembled one afternoon and, according to the *Chicago Democrat*, after proper warning, "drummed a very respectable young lady out of town for expressing a resolute determination to remain in a single state." This announcement provoked the ire of one, "Philo", who declared in the *Iowa News* that every young lady who emigrated to Iowa always took the precaution "to declare her intention to marry the *first* honest industrious young man that offers himself", and the Ever Green Grove men must therefore be "dishonest and lazy".

A common custom was the presentation of a



piece of the wedding cake to the local editor. This never failed to elicit a friendly comment. The Burlington editor felt that the champagne and fruit cake he received were not to be "snuffed at", particularly when they were so "nice and good". But James G. Edwards fared best of all when Elizabeth S. Knapp and Henry Eno joined hands in holy wedlock. "We were kindly remembered by the parties," the Fort Madison *Patriot* recorded, "having received, not a slice merely, but six or seven slices of as many different kinds of the very best of bridal cake. Verily, if this is the way they do such things in Wisconsin, or Iowa, that is to be, we shall not need to visit the Confectioner's".

Homespun entertainment reached its highest point of development with the theatrical performances of the Iowa Thespians in the large upstairs room of the Shakespeare House in Dubuque. The talented young men who established this first "Little Theater" in Iowa opened with William Dunlap's *The Glory of Columbia* on February 26, 1838. A variety of songs, duets, and trios added to the pleasure of the audience. A week later they repeated their performance, adding the laughable farce, *Gretna Green*, as a special attraction. "One evening devoted to amusement beguiles the tedious moments of a dull Saturday evening to those



who are situated, like ourselves, far from the home of friends, or even early acquaintances", observed the pioneer newspaper critic. "What harm can there be in the Thespian cause, which is devoted by all young men to innocent amusement? Tell us, ye critics, does it lead to dissipation? No."

Holidays were few in number in 1838. No mention was made of Easter services, although preachers must have dwelt on the Resurrection. Labor Day was unknown and Thanksgiving as a national holiday was not established until 1864. Only the Fourth of July seems to have been universally observed.

The celebration of St. Patrick's Day at Dubuque was accompanied by much conviviality as over sixty guests sat down to a "sumptuous" banquet prepared by Timothy Fanning. Patrick Quigley was president of the day and John B. Russell vice-president. Fifteen regular toasts were followed by thirty-eight volunteer sentiments: the Sons of Erin, the Emerald Isle, and St. Patrick vied in popularity with tributes to the United States, the Territory of Wisconsin, and Governor Henry Dodge. Some there were who held a double allegiance. John Foley toasted St. Patrick and George Washington: "One established Christianity on the ruins of Idolatry — the other, Liberty on the ruins of Tyranny."



The celebration of Christmas, according to the *Iowa News*, was a "day of jubilee" as well as a sacred and hallowed" event in the Christian religion. Although nothing was printed in the papers concerning the Yuletide festivities, there can be little doubt that the pioneers observed the day according to their meager resources, and in the customary manner of a hundred years ago. German immigrants had not yet imported the candle-lighted Christmas tree, but many a little boy and girl hung a stocking by the fireplace in anticipation of Santa Claus.

For the older folks it was a day for recollections of the past. "Thoughts of early days rush into our minds like welcome guests", mused the editor of the *Iowa News*. "Alas! that we should have traveled so far on the pathway of three score and ten;" he continued, "but Christmas brings all fresh to memory. It carries us to our first recollection of its observance as a holiday: — it is the magic that re-enacts the scenes of earlier days — that unlocks the sepulchre, and calls forth the dead to assume their part in that play of life. But it brings hilarity of feeling; sectarian prejudice is forgotten, the distinction of wealth silenced — and all join in the wish of — 'A Merry Christmas.' "

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN