

## Religion and Morality

The church was a vital force on the Iowa frontier in 1838. Clergymen had followed in the wake of the first settlers that crossed the Mississippi in 1833. Some were graduates of divinity schools while others got their religion at revival meetings and straightway went out to exhort their brethren to cast out the devil. By 1838 a number of churches had been established in the larger communities, usually with the coöperation of members from many faiths. Pastors of these congregations sought also to spread the Gospel to the scattered settlers. The circuit rider, the camp meeting, and the revival were characteristic of religious zeal a century ago.

Father Samuel Mazzuchelli, who spent much time preaching and administering the sacraments in the newly formed parishes in the Black Hawk Purchase, was amazed at the activity of Protestant ministers. "There is no corner, however remote," he declared, "that a settler has reached, where a minister of some sect has not made his voice heard, extolled the Bible as the sole rule of Faith, directed his enthusiastic prayers to Heaven and of course in one way or another vilified the



Catholic Church. The axe that hews down the first trees and clears the road for the emigrants cannot always boast of first breaking the profound silence of wild nature, for not seldom has it been preceded by the loud and boisterous voice of the religious fanatic."

The little log church erected by the Methodists at Dubuque in 1834 was still a center of religious, social, and political life four years later. William Weigley ministered to seventy-nine white and four colored members. He, like John Crummer at Bellevue, who preached to 139 members in 1838, was under the jurisdiction of the Galena district. The whole Black Hawk Purchase formed a part of the Illinois Conference of the Methodist Church. Such success prompted Mazzuchelli to declare: "The Methodist and Baptist sects which predominate over the most illiterate class, naturally have a greater number of preachers whose eloquence consists in much noisy speaking, in quoting the Bible in every sense that may suit them, in uttering the name of Jesus constantly, in inveighing furiously against sinners without explaining morality, in inviting every one to conversion through simple Faith in the Saviour, in extolling the word of the Gospel, and readily promising Paradise to their hearers."

Methodism was strongly entrenched in southern



Iowa. N. S. Bastion was pastor at Burlington. The adjacent territory was divided into the Mount Pleasant and Fort Madison circuits. Asa D. West, a "fair preacher", although handicapped by "some peculiarities of manner and address", was assigned to the Mount Pleasant circuit, which embraced all the land between the Skunk and Iowa rivers, except Burlington, and reported 192 members in 1838. Daniel G. Cartwright rode the circuit in the Fort Madison region. During the winter of 1837-1838, Cartwright faithfully traveled his circuit and never missed an appointment. "From West Point to Keokuk", Hawkins Taylor related, "there was nothing but a trail, and that, in the winter, was covered with nothing but ice and snow, and few settlers. Yet, rain or snow, he was always on time." Small wonder that Cartwright could report 226 members in his conference returns.

The Iowa River mission was apparently discontinued in 1837 and that area united with the Rockingham circuit to which Norris Hobart had been assigned. Hobart's task was not an easy one. He had to ride over the bleak prairies, and ford or swim the numerous tributaries of the Iowa and Mississippi rivers. For all this exposure and toil he received from his charge that year a total of \$69.03. But there were other compensations:



Hobart saw a class of eight members on the Wap-sinonock grow to 131.

No matter what his faith, the pioneer preacher endured many hardships. "It should be borne in mind that it required a ride of from two to three hundred miles each round, over a new country, destitute of roads, with the streams unbridged, to make all the appointments of a circuit. In that day, all this labor was required, and in most cases actually performed, on a paid salary of from one to two hundred dollars a year." The work of the Methodists yielded abundant fruit: Iowa membership totalled 738 in 1838, an increase of 353 over the previous year.

The Baptists had also entrenched themselves along the rivers and streams in Iowa. As early as October 19, 1834, Elder John Logan preached an evangelistic sermon in the rude hut of Noble Hously. On the following day eleven people organized the Long Creek (now Danville) Baptist Church. Another church was soon founded at Rock Springs, six miles southwest of Burlington. During the year 1838 the Baptists organized a church at Pisgah, twelve miles north of Burlington. The fourth Baptist church in Iowa was the Union Church in Lee County, conveniently located near the Des Moines River. Delegates from the Rock Springs and Pisgah churches met with the



Long Creek church in August of 1838 to organize a district association. The entire membership of these three Baptist churches at that time was less than ninety.

Presbyterians ranged the Black Hawk Purchase from Missouri to the Neutral Ground. The Cumberland branch blazed the trail, founding churches in present-day Allamakee and Des Moines counties before 1838. On June 24, 1837, an Old School Presbyterian church was established at West Point in Lee County. Another of the same bias was organized at Fort Madison in 1838 by Reverend J. A. Clark. The New School Presbyterians organized a church at Burlington on November 23, 1838. Preachers of the New School did most of their pioneering under the auspices of the American Home Missionary Society.

A committee of Friends from Illinois set up the first Monthly Meeting of Quakers in Iowa at Salem according to the following minutes: "Salem Monthly Meeting of Friends, first opened and held in Salem, Henry County, Iowa Territory, on the 8th day of the 10th Month 1838". This same meeting then proceeded to conduct the first regular business of the Society of Friends west of the Mississippi.

The organization of a church at Denmark in 1838 was a memorable event in Congregational



history. Asa Turner and Julius A. Reed examined thirty-two individuals at Denmark as to "their Christian experience, the ground of their hope, and their motives in wishing to constitute themselves a branch of Christ's visible Church." It was a pleasant day, Asa Turner recalled, "and the occasion one of great interest to the little immigrant band. They were the first to unfurl that banner on the west side of the Mississippi which more than two hundred years before their fathers unfurled over the Plymouth Rock; the first to profess those doctrines and embrace that church polity beyond the 'Father of Waters', which has blessed New England from generation to generation. The infant church stood alone on the outskirts of civilization, farther west than any other that bore the family name, cherishing the hope that their doctrines and polity might roll west with the wave of emigration."

Although outnumbered by their Protestant brethren the Roman Catholics had also laid firm foundations in Iowa. "We must not be astonished", Father Mazzuchelli declared in his *Memoirs*, "if everywhere in the New World, we meet so many ministers and so few Priests. This results from different causes; for instance, the greater number of Protestants, and the assistance supplied by their various societies to those who leave



the populous cities for the purpose of exercising the ministry of preaching in the most remote districts of the Republic."

Despite these handicaps the Catholics in Dubuque County already numbered eight hundred in 1837. Father Mazzuchelli was busily engaged completing St. Raphael's Church which he described as "built all of stone in the most solid manner". A beginning had also been made in Davenport where ground was broken for St. Anthony's Church in April, 1838. The first church building in Keokuk was also erected in 1838. It was a frame building known as St. John's Roman Catholic Church.

The privations of the priest were comparable to those of the circuit-riding preacher. "I board in various houses", Mazzuchelli wrote, "for I have no means to pay regular boarding, a bad table now and then. I have now good beds but no furniture. No salary — baptisms and marriages will give enough to buy the clothes".

Even though churches were taking root there were strong evidences of the difficulties that priest and preacher encountered. At Dubuque one who signed his name "Philo" called the attention of readers of the *Iowa News* to the fact that some of his good neighbors were not attending Sabbath preaching as they hitherto had done. "On meet-



ing many of them last week," Philo explained, "I concluded to propound to each one separately a few questions, something like the following: All well at home? Quite well! Quite well! I thought some one of the family might be ill, as you have not been at Church for half a dozen Sundays. Some gave one excuse and some another — here they are. The gentlemen — Oh Sir, I have to look over my drawers ev'ry Sunday — no other time to myself — letters to write — tied to business six days in a week — intend dozing to-day — forgot to shave in time — don't like to hear Mr. ——— preach — reproves people when they go out — says man is wicked — no one to pitch the tune — all pitch at once — don't keep time — Mr. ——— don't pray extempore — have to electioneer."

Philo found the ladies presenting similar excuses. "The Ladies — Could not dress in time — too warm — too dusty — too windy — promised to take a walk — can't breathe in Church where there are so many people — expect company to dinner — New bonnet not come home — Borrowed a novel — no other time to read the Anti-snuff-and-chewing-tobacco Society."

Newspaper editors did all in their power to stimulate an interest in church activities. They announced church services and revivals. Educators very generously opened their schools to religious



meetings of all kinds. On August 4th the *Iowa Territorial Gazette* noted that several elders were expected to attend a "protracted meeting" of the Rock Creek Church at the Rock Spring school-house. Religious services were frequently held in J. P. Stewart's Academy at Burlington. Soon after the school opened, Principal Stewart himself lectured one Sunday on "Universal Salvation". On October 20th, according to the *Gazette*, the Reverend Mr. Frazer of Macomb, Illinois, was expected "to preach at the School Room of Mr. Stewart, this afternoon at 3 o'clock, it being the commencement of a Communion Season, in the 1st Presbyterian Church of Burlington. The school bell will be rung twenty minutes before, and at the hour of meeting."

The influence of religion is attested by the standard of morality that prevailed in the Black Hawk Purchase. Drunkenness was not uncommon, for the frontier attracted many dissolute men. Despite the heterogeneous character of the population and the stimulus of the occasion, no liquor was drunk by the 500 citizens who celebrated the Fourth of July at West Point. The observance of Independence Day at Denmark by eighty pioneers seemed like a temperance meeting. While these communities were composed largely of straight-laced New Englanders, Fort Madison



contained a more cosmopolitan population. Nevertheless, "although wine was placed on the table, not more than two bottles were drunk by a very large company. The majority drank their sentiments in cold water." Even at Dubuque the editor of the *Iowa News* was "pleased to say that the immoral practices of drinking spirits to excess, was unknown" on the Fourth. "We have often said", James G. Edwards declared, "that the morality of the people on the west side of the Mississippi would compare with that of older states. The manner in which the Fourth of July was celebrated, as far as we know any thing about it, bears us out in this position. We have not heard of a single case of drunkenness or fighting that occurred on that day."

Enthusiastic temperance meetings in Dubuque, Burlington, and Fort Madison indicated the attitude of many pioneers on the liquor problem. Judging by the variety and quantity of alcoholic beverages offered for sale, drunkenness must have been common in some communities. Indians particularly were addicted to the use of firewater, and had to be protected by law against unscrupulous traders. On June 22, 1838, Keokuk and Appanoose inserted a notice in the Burlington paper cautioning "any person or persons against purchasing two notes of \$400 dollars each, executed



by James Fowler" because they were "signed by us when intoxicated, and we will not acknowledge or pay them."

Charles Heckman informed readers of the *Burlington Gazette* early in March that his New Exchange Coffee House was in "complete readiness for the accommodation of customers." The saloon was "newly and neatly fitted up in handsome style" and was prepared to serve up the "very best quality" liquors in "Ice Lemonades, Punches, Jupels, Cherries, &c &c., or plain, in a style to gratify the most fastidious palate." Perhaps as a challenge to this business, the Reverend P. B. Russell, Agent for the American Temperance Society, delivered a lecture on "Temperance and Reform" at Burlington on April 2nd. He spoke "at early candle-light, at the Methodist meeting room, in the house of Col. W. W. Chapman."

Not long afterward Timothy Turner, agent of the Illinois State Temperance Society, gave a temperance lecture at the Methodist Church in Dubuque. The Iowa Temperance Society had been organized there on March 4th. After speaking at Galena and Prairie du Chien this fiery "Apostle of Temperance" proceeded down the Mississippi to Fort Madison where he spoke in the spacious dining room of Cope's Hotel before the largest crowd ever assembled there. Thirty-seven signed a



pledge to abstain from use of all intoxicating drinks and others later professed a willingness to do so. Largely as a result of this meeting, a temperance society was organized at Fort Madison on April 27, 1838. The fifty charter members who signed the constitution agreed "not to use intoxicating Liquor as a drink, nor provide it as an article of refreshment for their friends". Samuel B. Ayres was elected president, Henry Eno was chosen as vice-president, and the name of Philip Viele appeared among the directors.

While Turner and Russell were crusading in the various Mississippi River towns, D. G. Cartwright was pleading the cause of temperance in the hinterland. He succeeded in forming a large society on the Des Moines River.

The local temperance movement received a stalwart supporter when Robert Lucas became Governor of the Territory of Iowa. In his first message to the legislature, Lucas took a firm stand against both intemperance and gambling. "These two vices", he declared, "may be considered the fountains from which almost every other crime proceeds, as the statistical reports of many of the penitentiaries conclusively show. They have produced more murders, robberies, and individual distress, than all other crimes put together . . . Could you in your wisdom devise ways and means to



check the progress of gambling and intemperance in this Territory, you will perform an act that would immortalize your names and entitle you to the gratitude of posterity." The Governor steadfastly refused to appoint to public office any one addicted to intemperance or gambling.

The legislature responded with important liquor legislation. It granted Davenport and Bloomington power to regulate the sale of ardent spirits; it authorized a heavy fine on any one found guilty of selling spirituous liquors to the Indians; it enabled counties to collect a grocery license of \$100 in incorporated towns and \$50 in other places. A "grocery", according to the meaning of this act, was a place where intoxicating liquor was sold. Venders of unwholesome liquors could be fined not more than \$500 nor less than \$30. Another statute prohibited the sale of liquor within two miles of a worshipping congregation, unless the seller possessed a license and sold in his regular place of business.

The Territorial legislature also passed an act to "prevent and punish gambling" and fixed heavy fines for violators. Meanwhile, local authorities legislated against games of chance: the Burlington council passed an ordinance imposing a fine upon a gambler who should bet "win or lose" any sum of money or valuable thing. In addition there



were ordinances against steamboats discharging freight on Sunday, against playing ball or running foot races on a wager on the Sabbath, and against disturbing the peace.

Though happy marriages were common, domestic bliss was not universal among the pioneers. Men complained of wives who left their "bed and board" and women petitioned for divorces. The Territorial legislature considered many demands for marriage annulment. Sex offenses sometimes appeared on court dockets. On one occasion "a few of the off-scourings of the earth" at Dubuque visited the Indian lodges for "base purposes" and upon meeting resistance inflicted "mortal wounds on an aged squaw".

Crimes of violence shocked the law-abiding pioneers. They were intolerant of horse thieves, claim jumpers, and murderers. Nevertheless, hot tempers led to quarrels that sometimes ended in tragedy. For example, David Rorer shot down his political opponent Cyrus S. Jacobs on the streets of Burlington in broad daylight. An argument between two lawyers over the possession of a hotel bed resulted in the murder of Colonel Nathaniel Knapp of Fort Madison by Isaac Hender-shott of Burlington. "Kelly, alias Anderson," was convicted of horse stealing". To protect themselves against claim-jumpers, speculators, and horse-



thieves, the citizens of the North Fork of the Maquoketa adopted a constitution on February 17, 1838, "to preserve order, peace, and harmony" and protect the settlers' claims. Local jails were only make-shift prisons. Congress was asked to build a penitentiary.

Life on the frontier was neither simple nor easy for many of the early settlers. Far removed from the help of relatives and friends, they had to wage their own struggle against vice and win their own peace in religious salvation. New conditions and situations confronted the pioneers that forced a readjustment in the ways of life. Ideas and traditions were changed under the broadening influence of the rolling prairies of Iowa. But the basic things of life still governed the ways of man. Religion formed the strong bulwark for the moral and spiritual life in the Black Hawk Purchase. The typical pioneer arrived with the family Bible in one hand and a spade in the other. In preparing the ground for the harvests of this world he did not forget to sow seeds for the life to come. Measured through the vista of a hundred years, the pioneers of 1838 sowed wisely and well. Who can gainsay Iowa's claim to the title of the Corn and Bible Commonwealth?

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN