

The Geography of Iowa Territory

"Iowa Territory! What an euphonious name!" exclaimed the Burlington editor when the "glorious" news arrived that the Territory of Wisconsin had been divided and that the Territory of Iowa would come into being on July 4, 1838. "We are now the Territory of *Iowa*", he continued, "an independent Territory — of a salubrious climate — fertile soil, industrious and rapidly increasing population, and of such geographical dimensions as will admit of our public functionaries fully and justly administering the laws and thereby fully securing the rights of the people — This is a great event, and great will be the consequences."

The act of Congress directed attention to geographical conditions. Area, climate, and resources were subjects of comment. "We behold the young Territory of Iowa," wrote the editor of the *Iowa News*, with a population of more than twenty-three thousand, acquired "within the short space of five years from the date of her purchase from the Indians, with thriving villages scattered all over her fertile prairies, and within two years from her first organization as a component part of the Territory of Wisconsin."

Although confined to a region west of the Mississippi River, the Territory of Iowa was nevertheless a wilderness empire of far-flung bounds. From Lake Itasca to the mouth of the Des Moines River, the Father of Waters flowed almost half its length (1100 miles) along the eastern border. From Itasca the eastern boundary extended northward to the pine-clad western reaches of the Lake of the Woods and intersected the forty-ninth parallel. On the north this vast domain was bounded by Canada for a distance of approximately three hundred and fifty miles between the Lake of the Woods and a point due north of the source of the White Earth River on the west. Except for a few miles, the western boundary was formed by the White Earth River and the muddy Missouri as it coursed for more than a thousand miles through the buffalo country to the northern boundary of the State of Missouri which formed the southern boundary of the Territory of Iowa.

The Territory of Iowa contained an area of nearly 200,000 square miles — larger than any State in the Union except Texas. Embraced in the arms of two mighty rivers, the vast region of prairie, plain, and forest land in the heart of the continent possessed fabulous resources. Only about 10,850 square miles of the Territory were open for settlement in 1838. This tract in the

southeast corner had been divided into twenty-one counties which boasted a population of 22,819. The rest of the country was still the Indians' hunting ground.

The Sauks and Foxes had moved their villages west of the Black Hawk Purchase. A few Ioways still camped on the Nodaway, and the Potawatomi were filtering into southwestern Iowa. The Winnebago were straggling unwillingly from Wisconsin into the Neutral Ground, a forty-mile-wide strip which bounded the Black Hawk Purchase on the north and extended in a southwesterly direction to the Des Moines River. North of them roamed the warlike Sioux.

The Indians were a constant source of worry to the pioneers. The special session of the Wisconsin legislature in June, 1838, sent a memorial to the United States Senate explaining the necessity of ratifying the treaties made with the Sioux, the Winnebago, and the Chippewa in 1837. Robert Lucas, in his first message to the Iowa legislature on November 12, 1838, recommended that the militia of the Territory "be divided into three divisions, six brigades, and twelve regiments" with a company of Rangers to each regiment. The Rangers, mounted and armed with rifles, rifle pistols, and short swords, were expected to be "most efficient" in Indian fighting. "I am satisfied", Lucas

told the legislature, "that troops thus organized, equipped *and disciplined, expressly for Indian fighting*, WITH STRICT DIRECTIONS NEVER TO THROW AWAY A FIRE, *nor to halt in pursuit*, first using their *rifles*, then *their pistols*, and as the last resort, their *swords*, would be more than an equal match for an equal number of the most efficient Indian warriors that ever assembled upon our frontier."

Andrew Logan, editor of the Davenport *Iowa Sun*, was delighted with the "many handsome and promising towns" located along the Mississippi and in the interior. Fort Madison occupied a "beautiful and commanding position" and was "progressing under the direction of well cultivated judgment and taste." The high character and energy of the citizens of Burlington, in his opinion, had made an enterprising place of the capital of the Territory, despite the "peculiar disadvantages" of its location. Logan believed any place above Muscatine Slough would be "unquestionably healthy". Dubuque was a "prosperous, healthy and public-spirited town" whose prospects were "extending on a highly flattering scale". The mineral wealth and agricultural resources of the Dubuque area were destined to make that city a "great trading town". With pardonable pride, the enthusiastic editor described Davenport's location

as "beyond all comparison" the most beautiful. "The interior of the territory is all rich, beautiful and productive, from end to end," he asserted. "Sober and industrious farmers may flock in from all quarters, and find a rich reward for pleasant and moderate toil. The interior of the territory is healthy, and every section of land admits of easy cultivation."

The Fort Madison *Patriot* prophesied that Iowa would soon be "knocking at the doors of Congress to be admitted into the Union." Many immigrants were settling along the Skunk River, which the *Patriot* felt was a "beautiful stream deserving a better name".

The Dubuque *Iowa News* welcomed the arrival of thirty or forty Scotch families on the Maquoketa from the Selkirk colony on the Red River of the North. "Their trip was truly a tedious one, coming as they did across the uninhabited country, without roads, and in small carts drawn by oxen." They saw few Indians on the long journey and were not molested.

Dr. Isaac Galland, who had lived in Iowa since 1829, praised the fertile Des Moines Valley. The "swift and shallow" water of the "transparent" Des Moines abounded in fish, he declared. Springs of excellent water were "found in great profusion along its shores". The bottom lands

are not very extensive, except in some places, but, Galland explained, "they are of a rich alluvial soil, covered generally with a heavy growth of forest trees, such as black and white walnut, hackberry, sugar tree, cherry, locust, mulberry, coffee nut, some buckeye, and all the varieties of oak".

J. N. Nicollet, the eminent French explorer and mathematician, journeyed far up the Missouri River in 1838. He found the swift current of the Missouri and the constant shifting of its sand-bars the "principal and most insurmountable" obstacle to navigation. The elevation of the Missouri above the Gulf of Mexico, according to Nicollet, was double that of the Mississippi. He estimated the altitude of Council Bluffs at 1,023 feet and that of Davenport at 528. Although Fort Pierre on the Missouri was in the same latitude as the lower end of Lake Pepin on the Mississippi, the former was 1,456 feet above sea level while the latter was but 710 feet. "These numerical relations", explained the observant explorer, account for the swifter current of the Missouri and "establish the fact, that the average level of the Missouri valley above the ocean is nearly twice more elevated than that of the Mississippi."

Nicollet found the vegetation of the Missouri and Mississippi valleys less abundant north of the Platte River on the west and Rock Island on the

east. Groves were smaller and the fringes of timber along the streams were narrower. Horse briar, fox and false grapes, gray dogwood, currants, and gooseberries were common undergrowth. "In the higher situations, and at the head of creeks," Nicollet noticed "the black walnut and mulberry, basswood, nettle-wood, intermingled with the common hawthorn, prickly ash, &c. On the high grassy or rocky banks, the black and bur oaks constitute the principal growth, but occasionally intermixed with the wild cherry, red cedar, hornbean, wild roses, and sumach. The low prairies bordering the rivers have a deep, fertile soil, and abound with sedge-grasses and leguminous plants."

Many conflicting reports about the climate were published. The editor of the *Iowa Territorial Gazette* was delighted with the weather at Burlington. "The climate of this extensive region", he declared on October 6, 1838, "is perhaps as propitious to health, as that of any country in the world. Its remoteness from the ocean secures it from those insalubrious winds which bring with them such a host of pulmonary disorders on the northern seaboard, while its high and dry soil and pure atmosphere, preserves it from the fatal fevers to which the flatter surface and more fervid sun of the lower Mississippi, often subject the denizens of the south."

Father Samuel Mazzuchelli had travelled extensively in Europe and the west and accordingly had some basis for comparison with other regions. "The climate", he asserted, "is much colder than in Europe under the same latitude; from the month of November to the end of March the thermometer generally keeps below the freezing point, and in the depth of winter falls often to twenty or even thirty degrees below in the more northern sections of the country. Snow covers the ground for about three months and the rivers are frozen over so completely as to serve during the winter as the most solid of pavements, not only for men but for draught animals also, so that journeys of hundreds of miles are made upon their frozen waters. The months of June, July and August are quite hot but upon the immensity of the great natural plains, ordinarily even in summer, one enjoys a cool and refreshing breeze."

The Territory of Iowa was a land of great beauty. Albert M. Lea described the general appearance as "one grand rolling prairie, along one side of which flows the mightiest river in the world, and through which numerous navigable streams pursue their devious way towards the ocean." Beautiful rivers and creeks could be found everywhere, many of them fed by lakes.

Not only those who lived in Iowa Territory

sang her praises. "The birth of a Territory and such a Territory, is no ordinary event", announced the Saint Louis *Bulletin*. "It will be the birth of a young giant, which in a few short years will exert a powerful influence in the whole Union — and one whose strength and proportions and beauty will be without a rival."

The economic significance of the Iowa country was recognized by New York and New Orleans, the two great rivals for the trade with the West. A New York legislative committee declared that Westerners "evidently prefer the market on the Atlantic; and they are making prodigious efforts to reach it." The New Orleans *Bee* believed Iowa and Wisconsin would form a mighty addition to the already dominant power of the Mississippi Valley, of which New Orleans "must forever be the mart, and centre of attraction." The editor was not unmindful of the fact that a railroad might some day connect the Mississippi with the Great Lakes, but was certain that the Father of Waters would always "form the main channel of communication of its upper branches with the ocean and with foreign lands."

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