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Letters to the Editor

One of the most valuable sources of information on early Iowa are the countless letters written to editors describing the various communities in the Hawkeye State. Some of these letters were by skilled observers, like Jesse Clement and his "Gleanings from the Note-Book of the Itinerant Editor." Others were written by local travelers commissioned by a busy editor to report on conditions existing in the surrounding country. All played an important part in acquainting readers, be they local or way back East, with the spectacular growth of the mushrooming settlements on the Iowa frontier.

The significance of such letters was noted by the editor of the Dubuque *Weekly Times* on January 13, 1857:

Few works are read with greater avidity and interest than those on travel. In this country it is peculiarly the case, and has resulted in a mania for traveling and adventures and their record. In many instances, personal experiences first find their way to the public mind in the rough

draft for the newspaper; after which they are polished up and presented in a durable form, and find a permanent location on book shelves. To some extent newspapers [Eastern] have made traveling narratives of less consequence, by the employment of correspondents in different sections of the world, who herald passing events rather than passenger events.

News is now the demand of the age, and we are more concerned to know what is transpiring among men, than know what man is. The latter is of more consequence, but "dollars and cents" are involved in the former. Philanthropy, chiefly, is interested in the one, Commerce in the other, and as the efforts of commerce transcend those of philanthropy, so is the desire for news greater than that for personage.

The sampling of letters culled from various Iowa newspapers between 1859 and 1872 are illustrative of those written about various Iowa frontier communities. In most instances these letters represent an untapped reservoir of information that could not be found elsewhere. They are but another evidence of the value of old newspaper files in recounting the story of Iowa's colorful past.

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