The Palimpsest

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS MAGAZINE

THE PALIMPSEST, issued monthly by the State Historical Society of Iowa, is devoted to the dissemination of Iowa History. Supplementing the other publications of this Society, it aims to present the materials of Iowa History in a form that is attractive and a style that is popular in the best sense—to the end that the story of our Commonwealth may be more widely read and cherished.

BENJ. F. SHAMBAUGH

THE MEANING OF PALIMPSEST

In early times a palimpsest was a parchment or other material from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the records of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

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THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

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New Counties in 1843

According to the treaty of October 11, 1842, the Sauks and Foxes agreed to remove by the following May 1st to the west side of the line "running due north and south from the painted or red rocks on the White Breast fork of the Des Moines river, which rocks will be found about eight miles, when reduced to a straight line, from the junction of the White Breast with the Des Moines." The President was authorized to appoint a commissioner to survey the line north to the Neutral Ground and south to the boundary of Missouri, and to mark the line so that the Indians and white men might readily distinguish the boundary separating their possessions.

The treaty negotiators apparently misunderstood the Indians' or traders' description of the location of the red rocks. Following the treaty directions the survey commissioner could find no red rocks on the White Breast eight miles from its mouth. On the north side of the Des Moines

River, however, about eight miles above the mouth of the White Breast, was a very conspicuous ledge of deep red sandstone, just such as would be a landmark known far and wide. Indeed, this was the only outcrop of red rock in that vicinity, situated near the center of section 35, township 77 north, range 20 west. The line, as surveyed, ran about a mile and a half west of the meridian separating ranges nineteen and twenty.

The Sauk and Fox cession in October, 1842, was not approved by the United States Senate until late in the winter and the treaty was finally proclaimed on March 23, 1843, but Iowa settlers anticipated no delay in the fulfillment of the terms. There was, in fact, a rush of squatters into the new country on May 1st. The surveyor general had been instructed on April 4, 1843, to begin running the township lines, and by November many of them in the southern half had been located. It was a "beautiful country," he reported, "and a heavy tide of population is rapidly rolling upon it for the purpose of *bona fide* settlement. Intelligence, industry, and enterprise are the characteristics of that population."

It was evident to the legislature of the Territory, before the treaty was ratified or the survey was begun, that provision should be made for local government in the new cession. On motion

of Thomas Cox, the Council resolved on January 18, 1843, to instruct the committee on Territorial affairs "to inquire into the expediency of so organizing new counties, in the late purchase from the Sac and Fox Indians of this Territory, so that the new counties, may elect Justices of the Peace, Constables, &c., and be attached to the adjoining counties for other judicial purposes, and that said new counties, be laid off and governed by the west boundaries of the old counties, and by a line running from the north west corner of the counties west of the Indian boundary line".

The committee, which consisted of William Patterson, Thomas Cox, and William H. Wallace, considered the matter and on January 27th reported a bill "to establish new counties and define their boundaries". After being amended by the judiciary committee, the bill was passed on February 2nd, apparently without opposition or debate.

As adopted by the Council, the measure created nine new counties and redefined the boundaries of three which had been established in 1837 but, contrary to later practice, had included territory which had not then been ceded by the Indians. Counties created ahead of the public land survey were irregular in shape, but the boundaries of those established afterward followed township

lines. Governor Lucas had insisted upon that principle in 1839. Thus, the size and shape of Iowa counties were no longer causes of serious controversy among the members of the legislature. It was comparatively simple to describe the new county boundaries in terms of township lines. Moreover, the committee which drafted the bill was directed to define the boundaries of the new counties in conformity with the western lines of the frontier row of old counties.

In naming the new counties the original bill honored several contemporary leaders in Iowa and national politics, as had been the custom. Already four counties had been named for Presidents—Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, and Van Buren. Clayton, Buchanan, Linn, and Jones were members of Congress for whom Iowa politicians had expressed respect in county names. It was natural, therefore, that the proposed names of the new counties should follow the same pattern. As approved by the Council the bill named the new counties Davis, Clarke, Chambers, Harrison, Dodge, Lucas, Iowa, Wapello, Calhoun, Tecumseh, and Black Hawk. The western boundary of Buchanan was altered indirectly but the bill did not contemplate reconstituting or renaming it.

In the House of Representatives the measure encountered opposition. Instead of correcting

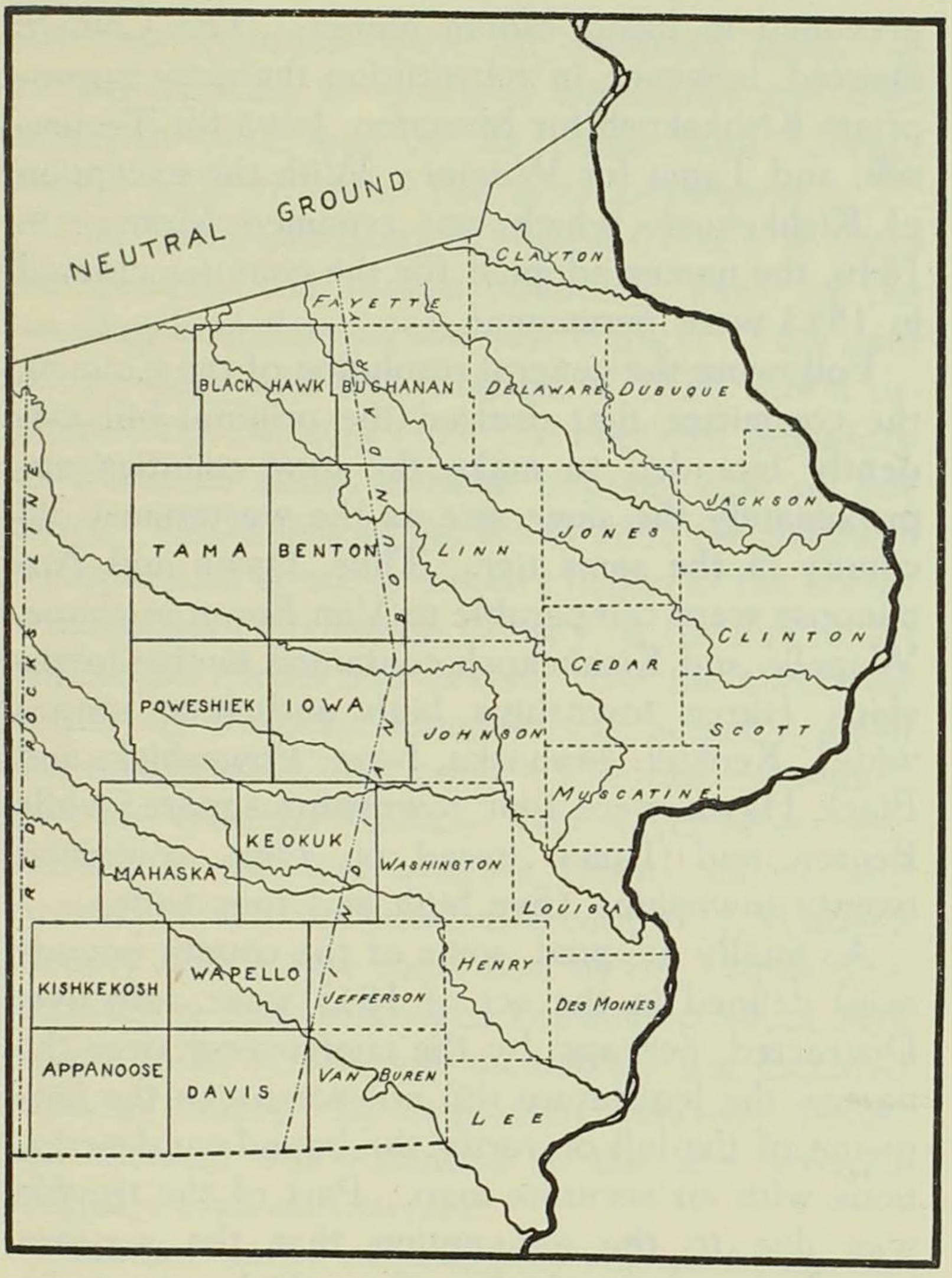
certain defects in the description of boundaries, however, the controversy seems to have centered upon the names of the counties. On February 3rd, upon the second reading of the bill, Thomas Rogers of Dubuque County moved to table the measure, which would have killed it. When this motion was lost, Thomas McMillan of Henry County persuaded the House to consider the bill in the committee of the whole. Apparently, some questions could not well be decided by so large a group and so, after some discussion on February 9th, the bill was referred to a special committee of one member from each Representative district.

When the special committee reported on Monday, February 13th, the nature of the dispute was revealed in the *Journal* of the House of Representatives. A large faction believed that Indian names would be more appropriate for the counties than the names of political leaders. The committee, therefore, proposed a series of amendments to that effect, most of which were adopted by the House. Appanoose was substituted for Clarke, Wapello for Chambers, Manaton for Harrison, Keokuk for Dodge, Mahaska for Lucas, Tecumseh for Iowa, Poweshiek for Wapello, Maquoketa for Calhoun, and Winani for Tecumseh. Only the name of Black Hawk was not

challenged. Neither Musquakee nor Massaaskuc was acceptable in place of Davis, in honor of Representative Garret Davis of Kentucky, but Seponoma was finally substituted by a narrow majority.

Though the original bill had included four Indian names, the House proposed to apply three of them to different counties. Keokuk (assigned to the unorganized county west of Johnson in 1837) was changed in the Council bill to Iowa, but the House substituted Tecumseh and shifted the name of Keokuk to the new county directly south. The Council named the county west of Iowa for Wapello, but the House applied that name to the county where Wapello's village was located on the Des Moines River and substituted Poweshiek as the name of the county west of Iowa. The county north of Poweshiek, called Tecumseh by the Council, was renamed Winani by the House, and Tecumseh was substituted for Iowa.

After the Council had refused to accept the House amendments and the House had refused to recede, a conference committee agreed upon a compromise. The name of Benton was retained for the county west of Linn in place of either Calhoun or Maquoketa, and Davis was restored in place of Seponoma. Otherwise the House



NEW COUNTIES IN 1843

prevailed in using Indian names. The Council insisted, however, in substituting the more appropriate Kishkekosh for Manaton, Iowa for Tecumseh, and Tama for Winani. With the exception of Kishkekosh, which was renamed Monroe in 1846, the names adopted for the counties created in 1843 were permanent.

Following the general resolution of the Council, the committee that drafted the original bill evidently intended to make the new counties approximately the same size as the westermost old county in the same tier. Thus, Davis and Appanoose were comparable to Van Buren in shape, Wapello and Kishkekosh contained twelve townships (three townships high and four ranges wide), Keokuk, Mahaska, Iowa, Poweshiek, and Black Hawk were four townships square, while Benton and Tama, based on Linn, contained twenty townships (five high and four wide).

As finally adopted, some of the county boundaries defined in the act of 1843 were defective. Distracted, perhaps, by the controversy over the names, the legislature did not scrutinize the language of the bill or verify the boundary descriptions with an accurate map. Part of the trouble was due to the assumption that the western boundaries of the old counties, which were to be identical with the eastern boundaries of some of

the new counties, were all township lines. A careful reading of previous legislation and consultation of a map of the public land surveys would have revealed this misapprehension.

The statute creating Jefferson County in 1839 designated "the Indian boundary line" as the western boundary of the new county. This limit of the Sauk and Fox cession of 1837 was a diagonal line running from the northern boundary of Missouri about thirteen degrees east of due north. According to the act of 1843 the northern boundary of Wapello County began at the northwest corner of Jefferson County on the line dividing ranges eleven and twelve. But the northwest corner of Jefferson County was actually about five miles east of that point. The eastern boundary of Wapello County was nevertheless described as the line between ranges eleven and twelve. Even the southeast corner of Wapello County was a few rods west of the Indian line. This left a triangular area containing about fifty square miles which was technically not included in either county. By implication, however, Jefferson County was extended to the line between ranges eleven and twelve.

Another source of ambiguity related to the unorganized counties of Buchanan, Benton, and Keokuk, established in 1837, which extended

westward across Indian lands to the Missouri River. Overlooking this fact, the framers of the act of 1843 located the northeast corner of Black Hawk County at the northwest corner of Buchanan and fixed the western boundary of Black Hawk on the line between ranges fourteen and fifteen. This, of course, was impossible, because the northwest corner of Buchanan was on the Missouri River. Assuming, however, that the western boundary of Buchanan might have been located on the line between ranges ten and eleven, then both counties would have been the same size. This was apparently what the legislators had in mind, though they certainly did not say so, for the boundaries of Black Hawk were actually established in accordance with this interpretation.

Benton and Keokuk counties, which, like Buchanan, had been abnormal, were, unlike Buchanan, definitely reëstablished with standard boundaries. Benton County was reduced to the same size as Linn which it joined on the east. In describing the new boundaries, however, an error occurred. The north line was to run west "to range (13) thirteen" and the west boundary was run from that point south to the corner of townships eighty-one and eighty-two between ranges thirteen and fourteen. Thus, the south end of the west line would be six miles west of the north

end. This inaccuracy also affected Tama County because its eastern boundary was defined as the western boundary of Benton. The wording of the law gave no basis for determining which meridian was meant. So much confusion resulted that the legislature in 1858 declared the line between ranges twelve and thirteen to be the true boundary, making Benton and Tama counties equal in size.

Whereas Keokuk County, between 1837 and 1843, had bordered Johnson County on the west, the new act moved it one tier of counties south so that it was located directly west of Washington County. Only the northern tier of townships in reconstituted Keokuk County had been included in the former county of that name. It was practically a new county, but technically it must be considered as an old one reduced in size and partially relocated; otherwise the former county of the same name would still exist because it was not specifically abolished.

In describing the boundaries of Davis County the word northwest was used where northeast was undoubtedly meant. It was a mistake easy to make and likely to be overlooked. Read literally, the sentence in which it occurred did not make sense. This error was corrected by the law in 1844 authorizing the organization of the

government of Davis County, wherein the boundaries were redefined permanently.

A hundred years ago, in 1843, thirty-one counties had been created by law in the Territory of Iowa. Most of them were in their final form. Practically all the land which had been ceded by the Indians was divided into counties. As rapidly as possible the section lines were surveyed and the land was offered for sale. Settlement was most rapid in the southeastern portion of the Sauk and Fox cession of 1842; and consequently county governments were organized first in Davis, Wapello, Keokuk, and Mahaska counties. The others established in 1843 were temporarily attached for political purposes to adjacent counties until the population justified locating a county seat and electing officials.

JOHN ELY BRIGGS

Iowa in the Fifties

"I have been mutch Deceived", wrote Leander V. Loomis in *A Journal of the Birmingham Emigrating Co.*, after a journey across Iowa in the spring of 1850. Instead of "rough country filled with scruby timber", which he had expected to find, he observed "as fine Prairie as I ever saw, and we might as well say no timber at-all." The absence of timber, he believed, would retard the settlement and agricultural development of Iowa. He expressed "fear" that the young men of his day would "see their heads grow white with age, before this great westery valley bettween the Desmoin and Missouri will be settled." Peter D. Ridenour noted "the general impression", in Iowa in 1854, "that one could not improve a farm without timber".

But in 1850 no one could "anticipate the wealth, and population, and influence for good or evil, that will be consecrated here," according to "J. C. H." of Dubuque, who wrote in the New York *Observer*. "Every day" he noted "new capabilities" for the sustenance of a large population and "a spirit of enterprise among the people" that gave "assurance" that Iowa would be-

come "fully improved". A heavy influx of settlers to the State wrought tremendous changes before the end of the fifties. "G. G. R.", who traveled across Iowa in 1851, wrote in the New York *Times* that the "rude, temporary cabins" of the settlers were then "a days journey apart". The last 150 miles of the route to Council Bluffs was "almost uninhabited", he stated. But when he made a similar journey four years later, he found "no longer the frontier". Then even western Iowa was "fast filling up" with people from New England and the Middle States. The broad prairies were becoming "cultivated farms". Cabins were "giving place to frame and brick houses." Settlements were "extending and towns . . . springing up".

In the fifties the onward and restless march of civilization leaped the waters of the Mississippi, "penetrating into every part" of Iowa, according to the Des Moines *Journal*. This was only natural for opportunities for settlement in the Hawkeye State were "heralded" in the eastern press. In common with other newspapers, the *National Intelligencer* (Washington, D. C.) "always" considered its "columns well employed when made the medium of communications" which described "geographical and geological features, climates, natural products, progress of settlement, state of

society, &c." The Chicago *Press* "appropriately termed" Iowa "the Canaan of the emigrant" and added: "We have given many facts in illustration of this remark." Moreover, other evidence to substantiate the truth of the statement was "coming up every day", the *Press* stated. Likewise, the New York *Tribune* "called the attention of . . . emigrating readers" to Iowa, where "a prairie country, as good as any" only awaited "cultivators to make it a rich agricultural region".

Subsequently, Iowa became "the great focus of emigration" in 1853 and 1854, according to a Davenport correspondent of the New York *Tribune*. He urged "good farmers to move there as soon as possible". The river ports "thronged" with emigrants in 1856, the Fort Madison *Plaindealer* reported, while the boats in 1859 were "loaded" with homeseekers according to the Dubuque *Weekly Times*. "Ezel", writing in the *Missouri Republican* (St. Louis) after a journey in Iowa, stated that he had seen "Teams string and line the way into every settlement," in 1858. Arriving in Sioux City, he learned that its 800 inhabitants had come "from almost every clime and country".

Land was the bullion of nature which these emigrants sought in Iowa. By 1856 Iowa land had become "a plain matter of substantial invest-

ments," the Chicago *Press* asserted, "sure . . . to yield a handsome return." Subsequently, land offices did an immense business. Seats on the stages from Dubuque to Decorah were reserved ten days in advance by men who sought to locate land there, the *Press* reported. Moreover, warrants were "pouring into the offices of the prominent Land Agents." Consequently, the Chicago newspaper concluded, "Iowa will make wonderful advances during the next five years." The New York *Tribune* reported that "many rushed" to the Sioux City and Council Bluffs land offices in 1856. In the latter city up to 10,000 acres were sold daily, according to the *Chronotype*. "Large numbers" of land agents, speculators, and actual settlers were "always on hand trying to get choicest land."

General Van Antwerp in a letter to the Keokuk *Gate City* stated that a daily average of two hundred land sales was made at Fort Dodge in May, 1857. "The bidding has been decidedly brisk", he wrote. About half the land sold at $1.25 per acre, but $1.50 was "common", and occasionally a quarter section brought from $2.50 to $2.85. Talladega County, Alabama, was "heavily represented by buyers", as well as the New England States, New York, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Illinois, and Ohio. The transactions were for cash,

since warrants were "inapplicable for locations at a public sale". However, they could be used for private entry upon conclusion of the public sale, and General Van Antwerp predicted that whatever real estate remained would "be swept like an avalanche with land warrants".

Nor was all the land purchased by "that host of undetermined molluscae styled 'agents'." The census revealed there were 32,716 males over fifteen years of age engaged in farming in Iowa in 1850, while ten years later there were 88,628, as well as 27,921 others classed as farm "laborers". The total population, which was less than 200,000 in 1850, more than tripled in the next decade. Similarly, the census revealed only 824,000 acres of "improved" and less than 2,000,000 acres of "unimproved" farm land in Iowa at the opening of the fifties. Ten years later the improved lands had increased over four and a half times to 3,792,000 acres while unimproved farms had multiplied over three-fold, to 6,272,000 acres. The increased value of livestock during the decade was another measure of progress. In 1850, all farm animals were valued at $3,689,000, but ten years later the value exceeded $22,476,000, a six-fold increase.

Iowa was beginning to assume a place among the important agricultural States before the Civil

War opened. More than 400,000 hogs were marketed in 1856, for a total exceeding $3,000,000. The same year corn production exceeded 31,000,000 bushels, the New York *Tribune* stated. Thus Iowa had started to produce an exportable surplus which meant "large quantities must necessarily seek some market on the Mississippi", according to *Hunt's Merchants' Magazine*. Consequently, Lansing, McGregor, Clayton City, Guttenberg, and other river towns became important export points for wheat. About 10,000 bushels "poured" into McGregor daily in 1859. "It is all drawn thither from the interior by teams," the Dubuque *Weekly Times* reported, "which stretch like an army from the river westward to Decorah and West Union, places nearly forty miles distant." Thus, while C. W. Lowrie of Keokuk wrote in the fifties that Iowa needed "strong arms, willing minds, and skillful hands to cultivate her rich, garden-like soil," the New York *Tribune* stated editorially before the end of the decade: "No state in the Union has made greater or more rapid advances . . . than she has."

Nor were Iowans concerned with their corn, hogs, and wheat alone. The *North Iowan* (Osage) asserted that there were "28 colleges" in Iowa in 1859. Included in the number was the

State University which was training "a more intelligent class of teachers" and proving itself "a great advantage as well as an honor to our State," the Council Bluffs *Bugle* wrote. Seminaries were started and the *Marshall County Times* noted that local newspapers "frequently . . . discussed the question of establishing a high school." Indeed, the Dubuque *Times* asserted: "The educational privileges of Iowa, considering her age, are second to no State in the Union". The *Times* concluded that the Hawkeye State was "truly progressive". Mill dams had replaced beaver dams, and prairies where buffalo roamed "half a dozen years ago . . . are waving with domestic grains of matchless fecundity", it observed. "What a magnificent growth!" wrote the editor of the New York *Tribune,* "and her moral and intellectual improvement kept full pace with her physical progress."

THOMAS E. TWEITO

Custom Built Coffins

In most rural communities there are usually some farmers, men of more than ordinary genius and initiative, who develop interesting and profitable avocations. The Miller family, living about sixteen miles southwest of Iowa City, Iowa, possessed these characteristics.

Benedict Miller, imbued with the pioneer spirit of his ancestors in Pennsylvania and Maryland, moved from Ohio to Iowa in 1850. He was born in Maryland on May 20, 1815, and his wife, Barbara Gingerich, was born in Waldeck, Germany, in 1816. They settled near relatives along Deer Creek in Washington Township of Johnson County. There Benedict not only managed a large farm but also tailored the clothes for his Amish neighbors and sawed the lumber for their buildings. His sawmill, driven by the water of Deer Creek, was an important community center for many years.

Benedict Miller's sons owned their farms and, like their father, found avocations that enabled them to serve their neighbors. Daniel became widely known as a sawyer and thresher. A younger son, John, owned a blacksmith and ma-

chine shop which drew patrons from near and far. The grandsons and great grandsons have continued the family tradition of specialization. Among them are sawyers, cabinet makers, a well driller, a miller, two dentists, several physicians, and four doctors of philosophy.

Perhaps none of Benedict's sons occupied a more important place in the community than did Jacob, for it was he who made the coffins in which his neighbors were buried. He first began this service as a side line in his regular wood-working shop. In the early days his coffins were neither expensive nor elaborate. The first ones were usually made of solid walnut and occasionally of cherry wood. Bleached muslin without padding was used for lining. There were no handles on the early models as they were carried with the aid of wooden bars. Later, when the demands for simplicity were no longer so exacting, black handles were added.

The average price of a coffin at first was eleven dollars; later it went up to fifteen. After Jacob's son, Lewis J. Miller, took over the business, he charged thirty dollars for a coffin and ten dollars for a "rough box" or vault made of one-inch lumber. Finally, the price became fixed at forty dollars for the casket and twenty-five for the rough box.

In those early days bodies were not embalmed and so the coffin had to be built with the greatest possible speed. Usually boards of different lengths had been smoothed so that it was possible to complete the casket in a day. By the next morning, the varnish having dried, the casket would be loaded on a spring wagon, covered, and delivered to the home where the dead body lay.

At first the one who came to order a coffin brought with him a measuring stick cut the exact length of the corpse. One time a rider, upon reaching Miller's residence, was very much perturbed because the mule he rode had just bitten off the end of the stick. In the Miller shop there are at present nearly fifty of these measuring sticks. On many of them information has been written. One stick, for example, is marked "Jerry Kauffman wife July 20, 1880 10 23 7½ 13 plenty high 12 will do." The stick was five feet six inches long. The coffin evidently was to have a head clearance of ten inches, widening out to twenty-three inches at the elbows and then tapering down to seven and one-half inches at the foot end. Later, strings instead of sticks were brought as measures of the corpses.

When, in 1940, the descendants of Joseph J. Swartzendruber met in reunion, the measuring

stick for their ancestor's coffin was shown. A half dozen grandsons then compared their height to that of the stick and discovered that all of them varied only slightly from the height of their grandfather.

As the years went by, the coffins lost some of their earlier simplicity. The rough boxes became heavier; one was ordered lined with tin to keep out the groundhogs. This request was prompted, no doubt, by the knowledge that bits of walnut wood had been carried to the surface of the ground from the dens of the groundhogs which were plentiful in the Lower Deer Creek Cemetery. The trustees of the church finally hired a veteran trapper and hunter, Barney Whetstine of Wassonville, to trap and shoot all the groundhogs in the neighborhood of the cemetery.

Jacob Miller made and sold over three hundred coffins and his son, Lewis, has made 144 to date. But the neighbors now very seldom purchase homemade caskets. Occasionally an old man places his order for his own coffin, but his family generally refuses to use it. Dr. Glen R. Miller, son of Lewis J., and the source of much of the material in this story, related that one such individual recently ordered his coffin and then declared, "And I'll see to it that they use it!"

In the Amish community between Sharon

Center and Kalona, Iowa, homemade caskets are still used. On funeral days one can see a light wagon carrying a covered coffin proceeding down the road toward the cemetery. Following the wagon will be the many buggies of the relatives and friends who at the cemetery will pay their last respects to the departed one.

MELVIN GINGERICH

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[Persons, places, and subjects, as well as specific items pertaining to each, are listed alphabetically. The names of contributors of articles to THE PALIMPSEST are printed in SMALL CAPITALS; the titles of articles, books, and plays and the names of boats are printed in *italics;* the titles of songs and poems are inclosed in quotation marks. Places not otherwise identified are in Iowa.]

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