

## 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 enterprize 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."

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