

# THE PALIMPSEST

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VOL. XV

ISSUED IN JULY 1934

NO. 7

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## A Port for Pioneers

Land, not gold, forests and trading posts rather than religious differences drew Amasa Doolittle, Simpson S. White, and Morton M. McCarver to the place that the fur traders called Flint Hills — the site of the future Burlington. This doughty triumvirate of brothers-in-law had ventured across the Mississippi in the fall of 1832 to prospect the Black Hawk Purchase for choice homesteads. Others likewise, before the date of Indian evacuation, had made furtive explorations of the hills and prairies and had even staked out their claims. Bolder intruders brought their stock across and began to build cabins.

News of a coming military raid sent many of these squatters back across the river. Partially erected buildings were torn down and burned in February by a detachment of infantry. But Solomon Perkins, later the first sheriff of Des Moines County, had built his cabin on a "stepped off"



claim five miles away, and it escaped the vigilance of the soldiers. Simpson White returned immediately and resumed the construction of his log cabin. Others waited for the first of June, 1833. At least twenty-five heads of families crossed the river to Flint Hills on that first day of legal settlement. Thereafter came a growing stream of pioneers — men, women, children — traders, surveyors, ferrymen, and merchants.

For these plain folk the axe, the plow, the compass and chain, rather than guns, were the conquering implements on the frontier. Doolittle and Benjamin Tupper laid out a town site, and cargoes of dry goods, groceries, drugs, and household goods were brought in by steamboat. More claims were staked out. Then a schoolhouse was built. Log fires in the rude cabins radiated comfort. The budding colony of about fifty families was digging in to stay.

For over a year the little settlement was a political orphan "without Law or Gospel". A young doctor was compelled to cross the river with his bride where both the license and the ceremony could be furnished by the State of Illinois. Fifty years later William Ross, the doctor, and Matilda Morgan, the bride, recalled the friendly sycamore tree and that flatboat bridal party of December 3, 1833.



John Gray the next month came from Vermont, importing a cargo of groceries and a fresh name — Burlington — for the Flint Hills settlement. Peter Cartwright, a mighty sky pilot, came in the spring to preach near Burlington. Soon after Barton H. Cartwright arrived to preach the gospel and also to break thirty acres of sod. On Sundays this "Ox Driver Preacher" turned from plow handles to pulpit, and week-day remarks to oxen gave way to Sunday sermons in cabins.

Congress then attached the Iowa country to the Territory of Michigan for judicial purposes. Two immense counties — Dubuque and Des Moines — were created. Burlington was chosen for the county seat of the latter and the judicial records begin with Dr. William R. Ross's clerkship of the court. Wills were probated, marriage licenses issued and recorded. In 1835 the grand jurors were summoned from such settlements as "Flint Hills", "Half Breed", "Tama Town", and "Fort Madison". Three divorces were granted at this term of court and an assault and battery case was tried. When two men in a rough brawl in the court room upset some dry goods boxes used for the court's desk, they were immediately found guilty of contempt of court!

Another record of this court reveals the humble possessions of Peter Williams, a pioneer farmer.



His land claim with its improvements was valued at \$400. Calves, horses, sows, and shoats were listed. A "Prairie Plough" was worth \$6.25. What were the volumes in a "lot of books" appraised at \$3.00? A "Waggon", a grindstone, a box of carpenter's tools, crockery, four large beds, one "whiskey barrel and focit", and half a dozen chairs — all to be sold for the children of the deceased as adjudged by the court of Demoine County in the Territory of Michigan in June of 1835.

A lawyer not yet twenty-one arrived from New Hampshire at Burlington in April, 1836. "There are in this town", wrote James W. Grimes, "six doctors, five lawyers, with myself, sixteen stores, five or six groceries, or, in New England, grog-shops. No minister in town. We had one but he died a few days ago." A passenger on the steamboat *Dubuque* in July, 1836, observed this bustling village and recorded that lots were selling for \$500 each. "A good blacksmith", reported Grimes five months later, "can make fifty dollars a month; carpenters, masons, joiners, etc., three dollars per day; a man for common work the year round twenty-five or thirty dollars per month."

Fever struck the little settlement in September, 1837, and whole families were sick. There was one "close by me," noted Grimes, "in which the



father, mother, and four children are down with the fever." A cold, early fall did not cheer the Burlington people and floating ice stopped navigation early. But then came thaws to permit river traffic until late in December.

After the legislature had adjourned in January, 1838, and Governor Dodge had gone to his home at Dodgeville, life in Burlington again became routine. New settlers kept arriving over land and water routes. Boats and ferries plied across the river. Town talk about the legislature shifted to roads, lands, the state of the river, the stores, and the steamboats with their cargoes of merchandise from Saint Louis. Old letters and newspapers brought news from relatives and friends in the East and of events of the world.

It was the locust year following the panic of 1837. "We have hard times here, such as were never conceived of in the East," wrote a young lawyer in March. "There is no money in this country. I saw a man today, who had been keeping a shop. He was obliged to sell out on credit, and he had, besides, small notes due to the extent of twenty-five hundred dollars, yet he could not raise enough money to buy a bushel of corn-meal for his family. Collecting is impossible for the Legislature passed a stay law of twelve months."

Torrents of rain fell in the spring of 1838 and



by May the Mississippi River was the highest in eleven years. The ferry charged fifty cents for one horse and carriage or wagon with persons and belongings; for each person and horse half that amount; a footman would be hauled across for eighteen and three-fourths cents; a two-horse wagon or a wagon with oxen was ferried for seventy-five cents; the rate was three cents per head for hogs, sheep, and goats; neat cattle were taken across for six and a fourth cents each. Double these duties could be charged in such a state of high water.

Patriotism also rose to high levels on Independence Day. Thirteen general toasts followed by twenty-six individual toasts were endured and perhaps listened to by the pioneer throngs. At least half the audience could applaud the toast of James W. Grimes: "The Ladies — they are as fair as the flowers of Iowa's prairies — may they by early cultivation, be as rich and productive as her soil."

Steady immigration flowed into and beyond the region of Burlington. The stream of humanity swelled as soon as the ice went out of the river in the spring and subsided with the advent of cold weather. Frequently three or four boats docked on the same day. A crowd of pleasure seekers on a Pennsylvania steamboat bound for the Falls of



Saint Anthony stopped in May, 1839, to parade through the streets. "Were it not that they had partners," wrote Editor Edwards, "we are not certain but the young men of our town might have thought this was the load of Yankee girls, promised them a long while ago. Their eyes sparkled, any how, when the ladies came on shore."

Invasions of settlers from Pennsylvania, Ohio, Virginia, and Illinois continued. But the characteristics of such people changed quickly because the population was so fluxible. "Human nature in every variety and shape can be seen 'without money and without price'. We see exhibitions of every grade of humanity from the highest to the lowest." On the opposite shore of the river the settlers looked like an army with its prancing steeds and army wagons. New arrivals were always on hand to replace those transported across by the steam ferry. To the west beyond the river lay opportunity and land at \$1.25 an acre.

Every part of the world was sending immigrants to this port: staid, phlegmatic Germans, enterprising New Englanders, hospitable Virginians, Ohioans, Hoosiers, aged men with children and grandchildren. Horses, cattle, and mules crowded the ferry. Young men from Cape Cod and New Hampshire, merchants with dry goods and car-



goes of Yankee notions that could be stored in a trunk came seeking their fortunes. "Here is the son of Erin's isle, spade upon his shoulder and mattock in hand, ready to dig our canals, level our hills, or excavate mountains."

Northbound steamboats arriving almost daily brought news and gossip of the river towns. Officers of such boats as the *Ione*, the *Brazil*, the *Quincy*, the *Omega*, the *Indian Queen*, the *Malta*, the *Rapids*, and the *Ariel* delivered newspapers from Saint Louis and other ports. Nine-tenths of the passengers on these upward trips, estimated an observer, were bound for the Territory of Iowa. One boat carried thirty German families from Pennsylvania who brought along sawed lumber, fitted, and ready to put up as houses. A hundred covered flatboats carried down the Iowa products of vegetables, beef, pork, and tallow. A number of these craft were built and laden, as well as shipped, from the port of Burlington.

By 1839 Burlington had become the commercial port for four counties containing about 15,000 people. The population estimates — not unmixed with pride and optimism — had risen from 1200 in 1838 to 1600. Two newspapers — the *Territorial Gazette & Burlington Advertiser* and the *Hawkeye and Patriot* — registered births and deaths and by weekly debates kept alive the



Whig and the Democratic parties. The oldest settlers remarked in midsummer that the river had never been so low. But the steamer *Ione* in August moved downstream with three keel-boats in tow.

Late in October, as the fall of 1839 was bowing itself out, Webb and Mauro's new steam ferry-boat, the *Shokoquon*, built at Louisville at a cost of \$7000, began its regular trips to the Illinois shore. Running ice crunched downstream a few days later to render navigation more and more hazardous until December 5th, when the Mississippi became icebound. A great jam of ice then formed which broke with a tremendous crash on February 20th. The whole village witnessed the spectacle which promised the renewal of navigation. On March 11th the *Ariel*, the first boat of the season to dock at Burlington, arrived from Saint Louis.

By the year 1840 the settlement of Burlington was becoming the object of descriptions and recollections. The oldest natives were then youngsters of six or seven years. It had witnessed the pageantry of river traffic, immigration, retreating Indians, and the birth of local government. Taverns and boarding-houses had become "hotels". In the summer of this year sixty or seventy buildings, many of them of three-story brick, were built.



Some houses exhibited architectural taste and beauty that would "put the blush of indolence" on some older towns of the eastern States. Modesty and pride, not equally mingled, prompted an editor and a one-time Bostonian to remark, "This city is really becoming one of the most interesting places within our knowledge."

J. P. Stewart's Academy of Science and Literature was opened in 1839 to both sexes but limited to thirty pupils. Philosophy, drawing, Latin, and about a dozen other subjects were offered. In Samuel M. Clendinin's school the next year fees ranged from \$4.50 to \$8.00 with a small additional charge for fuel. Mr. Burnham's Burlington Academy required fees of \$4.50, \$9.00, and \$16. Latin, Greek, and French were listed and he hoped to acquire some "electrical apparatus". Pupils were to study Webster's *Elementary Spelling Book* and the *Eclectic Readers*. Kirkman's *Grammar* was a text of many editions and long usage. Hale's *History of the United States* furnished students with dull catalogues of wars and administrations. These young people, unaware of their share in a pioneer process, were closer in point of time to the Revolutionary War than is the present generation to the Civil War.

Two steam ferries brought immigrants from the Illinois side in 1840. A visitor then counted twen-



ty retail and wholesale merchants and one jewelry store. Horses were given shelter in three livery stables. Three blacksmiths were on hand to shoe the animals. Two places were devoted to cabinet and chair making and one to carriage making. Steamboats brought patrons for the six tailors, the hatter, and the two shoemakers. Two tanners, one crockery and glassware store, three bakers, two butchers, and two drug stores were available to the pioneer farmers and to the 1300 villagers.

Troy post coaches carried the tri-weekly mails into and from Burlington. One letter was on the way from New York to Burlington for a year and twelve days. From Washington the most direct route to Burlington was by way of Columbus, Ohio, to Terre Haute, Indiana, and Peoria, Illinois. "But letters that come by the way of St. Louis", observed Governor Lucas in 1838, "are frequently received sooner than they are by any other route."

The Mansion House, formerly the Wisconsin House, promised reasonable rates. The larder, the stables, as well as the bar and cellars, had been given the special attention of the proprietors. L. J. Lockwood's Western Hotel had "Stone Stables" and also served the choicest viands of the season. Parlors and sleeping quarters were "chaste and convenient". The host promised to



conduct his place at reasonable rates and in a "*temperate*" manner. Why was one place called the "Oregon Hotel" — six years before the territory in the far west was acquired?

Many travellers knew the National House, or Fletcher's. There ninety-six chairs accommodated guests. It contained ten toilet tables, five bedsteads, fourteen wash stands, one counter, one small and one large Franklin stove, eleven "corn" seat chairs and two Hollingsworth tables. At the Mount Pleasant Hotel the food fitted the "appetites of epicures". With equal honesty but less taste the manager promised "that at all times the beds shall be free from other occupants than the lodgers."

The professional cards of sixteen lawyers were more modest. David Rorer, able and learned, had come in 1836. Two years later twenty men had been admitted to practice by the Supreme Court. "I am so well established here", wrote James W. Grimes in 1840, "that I have some credit, else I should starve to death assuredly." W. H. Starr and W. Henry Starr, J. C. Tracy, and J. C. Hall were prominent in the early bar of Burlington. Lawyers from other towns also aspired to a share of the legal business of the Territorial capital.

Six or seven doctors treated accidents and sickness before anaesthesia and the germ theory of



disease were known. Dr. Enos Lowe was an early postmaster. Doctors A. A. Stahl, J. J. Ransom, and William R. Ross left few records but rather the grateful memories of a pioneer settlement. Even the dentist, alleviator and sometimes maker of pains, had arrived at Burlington in 1840. J. W. Weed, Dentist, not only treated and extracted teeth but furnished them from a "full assortment of S. W. Stockton's latest improved and incorruptible teeth, which he will insert in any number, from one to whole setts, and in a manner so perfectly to rival nature, as to deceive the most observing, and in most cases without the slightest pain."

Liquor has always been quick to move to new frontiers. A religious society at Burlington in 1833 decided that any persons allowing any Indians to have whisky "should forfeit all the whiskey he or they shall have on hand." Governor Lucas added his influence to the cause against drink. Gambling and intemperance he regarded as the "contaminating evils" of the time. When the Territorial temperance society was formed in 1839 he became its first president. On Christmas day the meeting heard addresses, resolutions, reports, and a poem — all of native origin.

Shrink not when the foe appears;  
Spurn the coward's guilty fears;



Hear the shrieks, behold the tears  
Of ruined families.

*"Touch not — Taste not — Handle not"*  
Who would be a drunken sot,  
The worst of miseries!

Indians — never a serious danger at Burlington — were gradually retreating and becoming the object of recollections. In January, 1840, about fifty of them met Governor Lucas in conference to voice gloomy complaints over their lands and annuities as administered by Agent J. M. Street. Against their charges of fraud, the Governor explained the good efforts of the government and the deep concern of the Great Father at Washington. On the second day the Indians relaxed from their sullen mood to engage in war and religious dances. A great crowd looked on as the Governor and the interpreter acted as "managers of this unique ball".

The next summer some three hundred dissatisfied Sauks and Foxes met their agent John Beach in the north part of town. The agent listened to their complaints but insisted that he could transact business only in the council house. Disreputable whites had furnished liquor to some Indians who were then seen drunk on the streets and in the stores. These scenes, complained the local editor, were disgusting and indelicate to lady shoppers.



The tone — as well as the undertone — of pioneer Burlington was agricultural and rural. No railroads existed west of the Mississippi River, and, except for the steamboat, the means of transportation were those in vogue for centuries. The farm was the food emporium except for staples like flour, sugar, coffee, and a few other articles imported from Saint Louis. Salted and cured meats were not yet for several decades to be supplemented by the help of refrigeration. Preserved and dried fruits were foods in days when the processes of canning were hardly in their infancy. Land was so cheap and abundant that the pioneer farmers had hardly learned the meaning of conservation and the rotation of crops. Oil wicks and candles had not yet surrendered to gas jets, and the electric light was still far in the future.

The port of Burlington in 1840 was still young. Settled by the youth of the East and the South, it was converting a frontier into a State. Through this Mississippi River port continued to flow streams of immigrants or "movers". Some of these "settled"; some later joined streams to California, Kansas, Nebraska, and Oregon to reenact the pioneer process. From the East and South these pioneers bore memories and traditions; their hopes and visions lay in the West.

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