

Comment by the Editor

THE TIDE TURNS

From early morning until night, day after day, the roads were crowded with the endless caravan of settlers going farther west. The rumble and creaking of heavy wagons, the sharp crack of whips, the ceaseless thud of horses' hoofs, and occasionally the slower, softer tread of oxen mingled with the sound of human voices to constitute the symphony of the great migration. Old pioneers of the thirties and forties listened and marvelled. Through the timbered valleys, past flourishing towns and settled communities, out upon the open sea of grass sailed the argosies on wheels. These were the prairie farmers.

It was in the middle fifties that the tide of immigration to Iowa reached the flood stage. Hundreds of home seekers crossed the Mississippi every day and moved on to the interior. Four million acres of land were transferred to settlers in a single year. Prices soared, and still they came — shrewd New Englanders, thrifty agriculturists from the shallow-soiled fields of New York and Pennsylvania, veteran pioneers who had hewed their way through the forests of Ohio and Indiana, young men on the second or third move

of the family migration across the continent, and, among these natives, thousands of German, Irish, British, and Scandinavian immigrants.

Railroads were built across Illinois and on into Iowa. Towns were planned and lots were bought in anticipation of a metropolitan future. Opportunity seemed to be bounded only by the limits of hope and imagination.

And then came the "financial revulsion" of 1857. The exotic blossom of unlimited prosperity, nourished too much by speculation, suddenly withered. Production had outrun consumption. Credit tightened and the top-heavy load of debt began to topple. Vague doubt developed into general fear. A life insurance company suspended operations; merchants failed; four railroads went into bankruptcy; and the strain plunged most of the banks into the same abyss.

Emigration to Iowa was checked by business disaster. The movement which had increased the population of Hamilton and the six adjoining counties more than seven and a half times between 1852 and 1856 added less than five thousand inhabitants to that area during the next three years. News of the Spirit Lake Massacre and the crop failure in 1858 may have deterred some prospective settlers, but the principal reason why Iowa land lost its appeal was the blight of depression.

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