

Phantoms on the Old Road

The Old Military Road! How foreign the expression to the peaceful, early autumn calm that lay over the valleys dropping away to the right and left of the ridge along which the road wound. My comrade and I had shouldered our packs at Iowa City and, setting our faces toward the northeast, had begun with ambitious strides to walk the old thoroughfare from Iowa City to Dubuque — our only motive being that furnished by the old books which told us that so the pioneers of Iowa had done. We could well believe that the road was old but why should it be called military? If in yonder groves where now one sees the red barn gables shining between the trees there arose the battlements of European fortresses, or if the deeply furrowed crossroads that mark the county lines were international boundaries where armed sentinels scanned the passports ere we proceeded, then we might declare the name appropriate. But harvest fields, many-tinted woodlands, and farmers who nod cheerily as they pass are not military, and the name is only the heritage of other years.

How fain we would escape from the past! Last season's automobile is discarded for the newer model and this year's clothes will be the derision of next year's fashions. But geography binds us with

bands that only under the most unusual circumstances are broken. Long after the mapmaker is gone the names that he sprinkled over the sheet are still written and bear mute testimony to the nature of the world in which he lived. Wall Street has no wall; Back Bay has no bay; and the Military Road is no longer military.

Yet military it once was. Soldiers planned it, surveyed it, and used it. Eastern Iowa in 1839 was the frontier; the site of the territorial capital had just been chosen on the wild bluff that rises above the waters of the Iowa. The Mississippi River towns were full of men eager to venture forth into the wilderness, and the Indian trails on the prairies were followed by the ever-moving pioneers. That these irrepressible spirits would soon come into forcible contact with the Indians who only reluctantly had left their homes in the ceded "Forty Mile Strip" seemed inevitable, and in order that the iron hand of the government might be felt in the remotest valleys, roads were necessary whereby troops might be readily sent from the permanent posts to the scene of any disturbance. That one of these should lead from Dubuque, the commercial and military center of the Upper Mississippi, to Iowa City, the new capital, was logical; and by Act of Congress in 1839 an appropriation was made to pay for the surveying, grading, and bridging of such a thoroughfare. Yet even from the first, the number of soldiers who passed over it was surpassed by the incoming

swarm of settlers, and the military men did little more than leave their name upon their work.

And as such it is known to this day by all who dwell by its winding course. The college student who was painting the Ivanhoe Bridge laid down his brush — he was working for the county — and explained to us who pretended ignorance, that the real designation of the trail we followed was the Military Road. The gray-headed sage at Monticello who gossiped with us as we stopped to rest our weary feet at the Depot Park declaimed on the sacrilege of rerouting a few miles of the Military Road as some moderns favored; and at the Trappist Abbey, kind-hearted Brother Timothy, he of the twinkling eyes, led us down to the pasture gate and with his walking stick pointed out a cross-cut by which we might regain the Military Road. All knew of the glory that once was the portion of the old highway.

All but the reporter of that village paper into whose town we hobbled at noon. Jauntily he came out to interview these pedestrians — perhaps they were transcontinental hikers about to favor the town with a visit and the paper with a front page story. Disappointment for all. To him the Military Road meant nothing and when he heard of Iowa City — that was too common. Away he darted to the nearby poolroom where he was sure he could unearth important news.

How discouraging it was thus at the very door of publicity to have it slammed in the face! What

permanent record would now be left of this so historic a jaunt? In the dust of the road we left no trail over which investigators could puzzle and students write theses. And when the voices of the two travellers were stilled, who then would take up the tale of the intrepid historians who not only essayed to write of the pioneers but to live like them as well? This thought added to the torments of legs already weary, and the brightness of our spirits faded as the September afternoon darkened over the landscape.

Misery loves company and to console ourselves as the darkness gathered from the already gloomy valleys, we conjured up, one by one, the shades of departed wanderers to accompany us — a procession of phantoms of the Old Military Road. They were travellers whose journeyings have already been forgotten: Leather Stockings who had no Cooper; black-robed priests without their Parkman; frontier Ichabods whose singing school escapades no Irving has recorded; horse-thieves who were hanged before the first dime novel was penned; all that motley band of men and women whose yellowed letters are still unread, about the foundation stones of whose cabins the roots of lofty trees are now entwined, and many indeed who never wrote a letter, who never built a cabin but who, living, created that great romance that hovers about the wooded watercourses of Eastern Iowa, felt by everyone yet related by almost none.

Among the throng are Edmund Booth and his two

companions who tell of how they passed this way long before the rivers were bridged, and when few features marked the passage across the seas of waving prairie grass. Leaving Dubuque to make a residence in the West, they bid adieu to the sordid associations of "Dirty Hollow" and to the rippling waters of Catfish Creek with its busy mill, follow the dim trail that leads to the falls of the Maquoketa where already a few cabins cluster about the charming Cascade. Here and there are wagon ruts to guide their horses' feet along the winding ridge that like a huge serpent crawls on its way to the ford over the South Fork of the Maquoketa. And now the lights streaming out between the logs of the cabin of Daniel Varvel — first resident of Monticello — betoken a supper of ham and eggs, corn dodgers and coffee, and a bed in the fragrant hay piled high in the rude barn.

Early the next morning they are off again for there are streams to be crossed, Kitty's Creek and Fawn Creek, before the site of Anamosa is reached on the banks of the Wapsipinicon River. Booth goes no further but his two companions, bound for Iowa City, continue their way over the rolling prairie that stretches on to the waters of the Cedar where the lounging inhabitants of Ivanhoe point out the route to the new town. By hard riding they reach it before the evening of the second day and are soon, no doubt, at the tavern recounting their experiences by the way and listening perhaps to the complaints of

those, less fortunate than they, who wandering from the ridge had found themselves lost in the prairie swamps or whose horses tripped over the protruding roots. Glad are they all that the road builders are already at work.

Yonder in our procession of phantoms is one driving five yoke of oxen attached to a plow. Lyman Dillon is his name, and if the story of Dillon and his furrow had not been somewhat discredited by the historical critics his would have been the most honored position in the group. For the old tradition relates that it was he who first rescued travellers from the dangers of waywardness. Employed by citizens of Iowa City, with his oxen and plow he threw a furrow almost a hundred miles long extending from the capital to Dubuque, and the wagons and riders that followed this guide beat a road by its side which was the predecessor of the Military Road. However, though the records have made mythical parts of this tradition, he claims a rôle among these characters.

Now the shade of the real maker of the road, a United States army engineer by the name of Tilghman, joins us. Under his direction the surveys were made and contracts let for the construction of bridges, the grading through the swamps, and the ditching beside the road which cut a clean swath forty feet wide when forests or bushes were encountered.

At top speed one of Ansell Briggs' postriders

dashes by; but the commerce on the road increases and saddle bags can no longer contain the correspondence of prolific scribes. The Western Stage Company puts on four-horse coaches one of which now travels along silently beside us. A Concord Coach! How little the expression means to us who can describe vehicles only in terms of cylinders. They were things of beauty in which any man would be proud to ride, and pride our fathers did not lack. "How they looked around them with a self-satisfied air as they took a seat and waited for the stage to start" declared an old observer. "How they nodded their heads and waved their hands at envious friends as the driver gathered up the reins, cracked his whip and dashed away."

It was not always ease and splendor. There came mudholes in the road in which the polish of boots was lost as passengers dismounted and struggled through with as much difficulty as the lumbering coach. Here was a river swollen by spring rains and no longer fordable, so passengers crossed the rushing waters in skiffs and under the dripping trees awaited the coming of the other stage which would discharge its load and turn back. And in winter there was the cold that pierced the buffalo robes and the blinding snow storms when all the drifted road was obliterated and the driver, lantern in hand, stumbled before in search of uncovered landmarks, his shouted words carried away by the swirling gale.

What a brave race these "knights of the lash" were! — not, it is true, in the eyes of all their contemporaries. Pious Sunday School teachers warned the fidgety boys to stay away from the "barns" where there was nothing but loafers, rum and stories of the road; and one mother lamented the waywardness of her prodigal son, saying, "I'd jest as soon let that boy staid in that old printin' office as to had him gone to runnin' with them stage drivers." Beneath the corduroy suit, however, was usually as generous a soul as ever crossed the western plains. Stories, indeed, he had, and whoever climbed up on the box beside him and first judiciously praised the teams, was sure to be a sharer in them; and many a half-frozen traveller got the last drop from the whiskey bottle even though the nearest tavern were ten miles away. The valley stretches of the road that once reëchoed his song now return no music but the strident notes of the klaxon, and a whirring mechanism covers the ground once trod by the flying feet of the gallant four.

But look at the passengers who gaze from the windows of this spectre carriage. That young lady, with fair face almost hidden by bonnet, ribbons and curls, who seems so calmly unconscious that her hoops-skirts are filling a much larger proportion of the seat than the single fare entitles her to, is probably the daughter of some frontier politician coming from school in the East to be the reigning belle of the county town and break the hearts of half a score

of backwoods lawyers before she discovers which one has the speediest prospect of being sent to Congress. Those two high-hatted heads borne on broad shoulders over which capes are carelessly flung are filled with balanced sentences and classic perorations, for they are members of the Territorial legislature proceeding to the assembly at Iowa City where they hope to deliver their sentiments on the wickedness of banks and the lethargy of the Indian agents with more gusto and gesticulations than the cramped quarters of the coach allow. That solemn-visaged person whose eyes rest so dreamily upon the passing scenery would be the victim of one of the "river gangs" west of the Mississippi if they knew the riches hidden in his carpet bag, riches not his but funds which he has begged in the counting houses and parlors of the eastern cities. With them he will build a college for the sons and daughters of the pioneers — an institution from which, he hopes, will radiate an influence that will make of these prairies a Utopia. Already he sees the brick walls of the "Academy" with its trim cupola rising above the tops of the waving trees, the paths that entwine on its campus and the white cottages that line the village streets. The college was built and is now gone. Cattle graze along the old lanes where once the daughters and sons of deacons strolled; and the surrounding acres are as far from Utopia as the rest of Iowa. Still it is fondly remembered by some gray-headed men who remain, recalling not the lessons in

moral philosophy imparted within its chilly walls, but the nights in the literary society hall, the pranks played during prayers and solemn promises whispered where the campus shadows were darkest.

Other builders are there among the spirits from the phantom world. They are the home makers. On foot and on horseback they come, sturdy backwoodsmen who have already hewed the forests in Kentucky, Indiana and Tennessee, and wiry Yankees from the States of granite and fish. Some bring nothing but rifle, ax and stout heart; others guide beside them the oxen-drawn wagon with tow-headed boys, "hoopless" girls, and panting dogs trailing behind. Not only for Iowa are they bound; the lure of California draws many. Eight hundred teams passed over the road in the years 1851-1852 destined for the Golden State, proceeding as solitary individuals or in large parties of men and women organized and captained by old campaigners who could draw up the ranks to deliver two hundred shots in ten minutes or in close quarters fall upon the lurking redskins and with revolvers and "Bowie" give them a "Tennessee fight". A later generation of gold hunters follows, those who seek the hidden treasures of Pike's Peak. Like the "Forty-niners", the "Fifty-niners" pass clad in all varieties of picturesque costumes as if on a gay pleasure jaunt accompanied by bands of music to shorten the dreary stretches of the westward way. Here also come the shades of those three small boys of Cascade who,

inspired by the sight of the passing throngs and fired by the stories of the "Peakers" who stopped to ask for a drink, set out on foot for the Eldorado provided only with high hopes and a dozen and a half of eggs, and were overtaken by anxious friends only when the steeples of Anamosa were within sight.

More gorgeous cavalcades than these are the troops of United States dragoons who pass and re-pass, now hot on the trail of renegade Indians who have broken across the treaty line and are terrifying the new settlers, now returning leisurely, the manacled offenders in their midst. Here are other avengers of the law that travel quickly forward, the energetic county sheriff with his posse of farmers called from the plow and flail, scanning the muddy bottoms for traces of those thieves who with the frightened led-horses dragging behind, passed this way at midnight.

Who is this proceeding so cheerfully along with a smile for everyone and a helping hand for the emigrant who is repairing his broken wheel or axle? He is the frontier minister who christens the cabin children, rewards the patience of the bachelor homesteader with a bride, terrifies the souls of chronic sinners with warnings of impending doom and prays over the first grave dug in the green of the new cemetery. Perhaps it is the shade of Brother Taylor, Methodist circuit rider, who shed so many tears in the pulpit, that his hearers knew him only as "Weep-

ing Jeremiah"; or it may be the spirit of the Rev. Mr. Swerengen who never missed his fortnightly appointments in summer's heat or winter's cold, though he often ascended the platform so chilled by his struggle through the wintry road that the overcoat was discarded only after the discourse had waxed hot.

Far before us village windows begin to twinkle and as our minds turn more to supper and bed our ghostly companions become dimmer: lawyer and land agent hand in hand; pioneer doctor, dispenser of pills, expert "bleeder" and healer of man and beast; friendly neighbors on their way to a "raising"; their sons and daughters returning from a spelling bee; and all that host of plain men and women, good and bad, who compose the foundation upon which the great figures of any generation stand. This passing pageant has revealed to us a secret of the history of Iowa.

What manner of men were they who first cut the forests and broke the sod of the Commonwealth? One person looking into the past sees in the dark ravine the evening rendezvous where about the flaring flames are gathered the ruffian gang who stole the horses and passed the bogus money, and he says the original Iowans were cut-throats and ruffians. Another sees spire after spire of school and church rising upon country lanes and village streets and he declares that the foundation stone of the State was the idealism of God-fearing men. A third

sees the curling smoke that comes from the hearths of a thousand cabins and he says the State was built about the home.

Still we must look not in the valley or on the plain or in the clearing to find the touchstone of the life of the State. Look upon the road — that great artery that poured in all the elements of weakness or strength, of lawlessness or order, of blasphemy or godliness that struggled for the mastery and whose conflict constitutes much of Iowa's story. Such a vision anyone may see who after studying the way his fathers lived will venture out upon the road to read the records that they have left.

But for us it has faded, and stretching out on the road before is a yellow shaft of light growing brighter and brighter. There is a warning signal sounded behind and we gingerly step aside as an automobile rushes by, its gay occupants shouting and laughing and singing. How like the present generation, we muse as the dark road is retaken. How devoid of gratitude they unthinkingly pass over the highways whose roughness has been worn smooth by the painful steps of predecessors — the highways of law, of learning, of religion as well as the Old Military Road.

Again there is the piercing warning in the rear. Again we jump to right and left, but too late to escape the stifling cloud of dust that fills the air so lately peopled by the shades of the wanderers of yesterday. Gone now are the bits of our homely

philosophy. The law against unlighted motor vehicles should be enforced, we angrily declare, and having wiped the dust from our faces we shake our fists at the departing tumult and with husky throats consign these travellers to a darker oblivion than has ever befallen any of their fore-runners on the Old Military Road.

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