

The English Community in Iowa¹

The usual crowd gathered on the platform of the railroad station at Le Mars, one day in the spring of 1881, greeted the arrival of the train, and gazed curiously at the passengers it deposited before puffing its way on across the prairies. A sprinkling of local farmers and merchants who were returning from business trips, a drummer or two, and a family coming to make a home in the Northwest attracted only incidental attention, but there was a rustle of curiosity as some well-dressed but plainly foreign travellers appeared. They were a typical group of the English settlers at that time coming into north-western Iowa, of whom a local editor drew this composite picture:

They descend from the recesses of the Pullman palace cars dressed in the latest London and Paris styles, with Oxford hats, bright linen shining on their bosoms, a gold repeater ticking in the depths of their fashionably cut vest pockets and probably carrying in their hands the latest agony in canes. If ladies accompany the party their graceful forms are shrouded in the most elegant of cloaks or dolmans, their heads being surmounted by the most coquettish of bonnets and their fresh countenances beam with the ruddy glow of health and good nature. . . .

¹ Much of the material from which this account has been compiled was collected by Mr. Jacob Van der Zee.

The scene at the baggage car is as peculiar. Stout jappanned and heavy leathern boxes and trunks are tossed on the platform by the inveterate baggagesmasher, who seems to make a final effort to sunder their seemingly invulnerable joints. Box after box, trunk after trunk, until a miniature mountain has been built on the platform. We recall an instance last summer of a single family that had eighty-two pieces of baggage, all of the strong and desirable variety.

They are by no means so dainty as they seem. In a day or two the men are seen on the streets with the plainest of stout corduroy suits, with knee-breeches and leather leggings. Great, strong, hardy-looking fellows they are, and though most of them are fresh from the English schools and universities, they have plenty of muscle and snap. . . .

The question will be asked, what kind of settlers for a new country do these dainty and wealthy looking persons make? and the answer is, the best in the world.

This picture is representative of an immigration that brought hundreds of settlers and millions of dollars to assist in opening up the new lands in the frontier corner of the State. The vanguard of this peaceful British invasion was William B. Close, a graduate of Cambridge and the captain of the university rowing crew of 1876, who came to the United States that year to take part in a regatta which was one of the features of the centennial celebration. The young man, however, was interested in business as well as in sport, for the Close family had some money to invest — preferably in land — and, hearing through a chance acquaintance of the lands for sale

in northwestern Iowa, he decided to investigate that location.

It happened that for a number of years the grasshoppers had invaded the farms in the Northwest and swept away almost everything which had been raised, leaving the settlers destitute and discouraged. Many desired to sell their homesteads and, partly as a result of this plague, land there was cheap. It was, however, well adapted for stock raising, and this was exactly what was wanted. There were also thousands of acres of railroad lands which might be secured at a reasonable price.

A trip to Le Mars and vicinity convinced Mr. Close that here was an opening for the profitable investment of English capital. He formed a company with his brothers, James B. Close and Fred Brooks Close, and the firm purchased some 30,000 acres in Plymouth County for about \$2.50 per acre; the two younger brothers came to Iowa; and the firm of Close Brothers and Company began their farming and real estate business. Thus the foundations were laid for one of the unique social experiments in Iowa history, although there was nothing socialistic or communistic in the minds of the English settlers who followed the Close brothers to northwestern Iowa.

Some of the land was farmed directly by the owners. William B. Close, for example, had a farm of 2000 acres at West Fork, some twenty miles west of Le Mars, where he had 2000 sheep and some 1600

head of cattle. His two brothers had a farm of 960 acres near Le Mars with a three-story frame house and stables for thirty horses. Tracts of 1000 acres, belonging to other wealthy Englishmen, were not uncommon and many of these farms were given such names as "Gypsy Hill", "Inchinnock", and "Troscoed". It is said that letters addressed to a farm by name but not having the town and State designated were always sent to Le Mars. Stock raising was the chief activity on these farms and high grade horses, cattle, sheep, and hogs were imported. A servant of William B. Close is reported to have made eighty-five trips across the Atlantic in charge of stock for the Iowa colony.

The greater part of the land handled by the firm, however, was laid out in small farms of 80 or 160 acres. It was estimated that 160 acres of this unimproved land cost about \$1000. A small house, stable, well, and sheds were added, costing perhaps \$500 additional, and usually some breaking — the first plowing of the tough prairie sod — was done, for which the firm paid about \$2.25 per acre. In the summer of 1881 the arrangements were made for breaking 30,000 acres in Lyon and Osceola counties; and William McKay was given the contract for the erection of 90 houses and an equal number of stables. These improved farms were then sold outright to any persons who wished to buy land — Americans, English, Irish, Dutch, or Scandinavians — or they were rented, the tenant usually providing the labor

and stock, and giving to the firm one-third or one-half the crop or, in some cases, a cash rent. Three hundred of these farms were advertised in Lyon and Osceola counties in 1881 and no difficulty was found in securing purchasers or renters. On such farms the firm frequently made as much as fifty per cent profit, while the settler also made a larger profit than he would have been able to make on unimproved land.

The English firm believed that this plan would require less supervision and was less likely to result in serious loss than the system followed by Oliver Dalrymple of St. Paul who cultivated some seventy thousand acres in Minnesota, furnishing the machinery, seed, and horses, and employing the necessary laborers. An English newspaper man reported that Dalrymple had one hundred and twenty reaping machines and twenty-one threshing machines. The grain was hauled directly from the field to the threshing machines and from there to the market. The large amount of capital needed for this method of farming, the danger of a crop failure, and the difficulty of securing laborers who would take the proper care of the stock and machinery were the chief reasons for the decentralized system followed in the English projects.

The Close brothers soon made plans to promote the extensive investment of English capital in Iowa lands and to encourage the emigration to Iowa of men from England, especially those with at least

\$2500 to \$5000 capital. Artisans, mechanics, and laborers were not encouraged to emigrate, unless sure of employment, as agriculture was practically the only industry and labor was cheap. "A man entirely without means of subsistence is worse off in the United States than in England", they were told. Whether the people in England were considered more charitable or death by starvation less painful there we are not informed.

In order to get in touch with the people who had sufficient capital to purchase farms in Iowa, William B. Close returned to England to take charge of the publicity work there and to direct those who wished to join the Iowa colony. A commission of fifty pounds was charged for the advice and assistance of the company in selecting land and beginning farming.

To reassure investors who had had dreams of Indians carrying tomahawks and bad men shooting up the towns for recreation, Mr. Close explained that there were no Indians near Le Mars and the population was settled and orderly, drawn largely from New England and northern Europe. "The Negro and other disturbing elements are conspicuous only by their absence", the possible emigrant was informed. "Fire-arms, revolvers, bowie knives, and such playthings are never carried about and are not wanted." The possibility of invasions by the grasshoppers, the cold of the winters, and the heat of the summers were frankly conceded in some of

this publicity material. Moreover, though the respectability of the other settlers was unquestioned, it seems that their social status was not, for Mr. Close added this reassurance: "The lack of society, which is inevitable to a new colony and which the first ladies who went out have felt a little, is being rapidly obviated by the class and number of the people going out, and the want of trained servants, by one of the best societies in Scotland for training young girls having offered to supply their best girls to good families going out."

Just how much land this English firm bought and sold in Iowa it is difficult to say, but purchases of 40,000, 18,000, 25,000, 19,000 and 14,000 acres at various times indicate that their real estate business was extensive. In addition, they acted as the agents for the sale of the railroad lands. That their property holdings were large is evident from the fact that in 1882 the Close interests paid taxes to the amount of some \$13,500 in the five counties of Woodbury, Plymouth, Osceola, Sioux, and Lyon, while another English land company paid \$10,000 in taxes in Osceola County alone. This was the Iowa Land Company, with a capital stock of \$2,500,000, organized largely by the Close brothers and the Duke of Sutherland for whom the town of Sutherland in O'Brien County was named.

In addition to the real estate business, there was a definite attempt to establish an English community in northwestern Iowa. Some five or six hundred

English people came to the vicinity of Le Mars bringing with them their English ideals of business, food, living conditions, and recreation. These people were not the type we usually visualize as immigrants: they were not seeking a haven from religious or political persecution, nor were they driven into exile by poverty. They were educated, well-to-do, and self reliant, accustomed to comfort and even luxury at home. There was even a sprinkling of titles among the newcomers, and university graduates were not uncommon. "No young English gentlemen could work hard on a diet of beans and bacon, such as he gets in the house of the Western American farmer", declared a visitor, and it seems that these English farmers added roast beef, marmalade, plum pudding, and tea to the usual frontier fare. Pianos, furnaces, and bathrooms were sometimes mentioned in descriptions of the houses on the larger farms.

Since many of the younger men who came to Iowa knew nothing of farming, especially under American conditions, some of the older and more experienced residents offered to receive a number of such young fellows into their homes, teach them the fundamentals of stock raising, and give them advice when they began farming for themselves. These agricultural apprentices usually paid a certain premium for this instruction in addition to working on the farms.

This plan of employing the younger sons of well-

to-do and aristocratic families as farm laborers seems to have struck the London *Punch* as a joke. It published a picture representing two young women, designated as Lady Maria and Lady Emily, dressed as kitchen maids, busy getting dinner. Lord John and Baron Somebody had just come in from work loaded with shovels and picks. The picture was entitled "A hint to younger sons of our aristocracy and eke to the daughters thereof" and Lady Maria was represented as saying, "How *late* you are boys: your baths are ready, and I've mended your dress trousers, Jack. So look sharp and clean yourselves, and then you can lay the cloth, and keep an eye on the mutton while Emily and I are dressing for dinner."

That a sense of humor was not lacking among these English visitors — contrary to the usual opinion — is evident also from a letter written by a young Englishman and published in the Manchester *Courier* in which he said: "To us English it is wonderful how civil all Yankees are, nothing could be too good for us. They opened doors for us, carried our bags and never took a 'tip' during our travels; but there the English, as a rule, carry revolvers and now and then use them, which creates respect."

Among the gentlemen who joined the Close brothers in assuming responsibility for these young fellows was Captain Reynolds Moreton, a retired officer of the English navy and a brother of Lord Decies. Moreton's farm was a short distance from

Le Mars and an English newspaper correspondent has left the following description of the activities there on the day he visited Le Mars:

Captain Moreton is a father to the Colony, a good religious man, with great influence over all the young fellows. He farms about one thousand acres near the town, and has twenty-two young fellows with him, on the same principle as the Close pupils, and these Moreton boys are taken especially good care of; but, of course, admission to the captain's establishment is not an easy matter to procure. His boys do all the work of the farm. Lord Hobart, when I was there, was mowing, assisted by two of Lord St. Vincent's sons, and the hon. captain was feeding a threshing machine. It was hot, but every one looked happy, even young Moreton, who was firing and driving the steam engine.

This establishment was nicknamed "Moreton's pup farm" by the neighbors to whom the escapades of these English boys were a constant source of criticism and amusement. Many were the stories related of "Moreton's pups" and the other young fellows who refused to take life as seriously as frontier conditions demanded. Their labor must not have been altogether an asset for they sometimes used the handles of their hay forks as targets for revolver practice or ran hurdle races in the field with horses hitched to hayrakes. It is said that a group of these boys once rode their horses into the saloon in Le Mars, popularly known as the "House of Lords". This establishment seems to have been

a general rendezvous for many Englishmen and the local editor declared that the first rural telephone in the vicinity was from Captain Moreton's farm to the "House of Lords" for the benefit of the "pups".

The dangers of intemperance were recognized by the leading men in the English colony and one of the advertising pamphlets contained the following warning: "The great drawback to English settlers is the difficulty they experience in keeping from drink. Unless a man will keep from that vice he had better stay in England, where he can get the drink he is used to, for a drunkard will no more succeed in Iowa than in England." It appears, however, that despite this warning the Le Mars colony did not take kindly to prohibition — at least opponents of the prohibitory amendment of 1882 used this as an argument against its ratification. They asserted that English investors would cease to come to Iowa and that the Close brothers would transfer their business to Minnesota where they already had large interests. The vote in these counties on the prohibitory amendment in 1882, however, reveals no pronounced opposition.

To counteract the tendency to dissipation and maintain the traditions of English life, the leading men encouraged and fostered sports of many kinds. "We have started a cricket club and a new clergyman this month, and both of them are, I am glad to say, a success", wrote one of the settlers in August, 1881. To the American settler or the hard-working

European immigrant, the devotion of their English neighbors to cricket or hockey must have seemed incomprehensible, but the English middle classes have always believed that "all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy" and these young Englishmen took time for chess, hockey, cricket, polo, lacrosse, football, and deer hunting. Even cock-fighting was occasionally reported. The English football was described as "an exciting game, resembling for all the world an Arkansaw rough-and-tumble free fight". Some of the young men with musical talent organized the Prairie Minstrels and gave public entertainments.

Horse racing was par excellence the favorite sport, however, and in this interest the Americans joined. The Le Mars derby was, for several years, an event of some importance in the northwest. Special trains were run from Omaha, St. Paul, and Chicago and a race horse valued at \$25,000 was sent from Europe to take part in the races. Some international competition seems to have developed at these races for the local paper reported that in all races to which American owned horses were admitted they carried off the honors. General satisfaction with the fairness of the English promoters of the affair, however, was frequently expressed.

On the whole, there seems to have been the most friendly relations between these English settlers and their neighbors. Some criticism resulted from the escapades of a few young fellows who were more

interested in a good time than in agriculture; and there was also some friction over naturalization, for many of the Englishmen were not certain that they would remain permanently, and did not ask for citizenship. Resolutions of sympathy for Mrs. Garfield, addresses by prominent Englishmen at memorial services in honor of the dead president, and a gift of \$200 from the Close brothers to aid flood sufferers, in keeping with their "reputation for generosity and public spirit", however, are examples of the sympathy which did much to allay what little dissatisfaction arose over the question of national allegiance. A Le Mars church is said to have been the only one in the United States where prayers were offered for the Queen of England; and the spirits of John Hancock and Thomas Jefferson must have marvelled at the sight of a British flag raised in honor of the Fourth of July on the prairies west of the Mississippi River.

Confidence in the business integrity of the English firms likewise promoted this spirit of coöperation. A Sibley paper congratulated the community on securing the headquarters of the Iowa Land Company and added: "Those who have had dealings with Close Bros., in the way of contracts for breaking, find them to be honorable gentlemen and always ready to do what is right. And as James B. Close will have charge of the business of the Iowa Land Company, the relations of our people with it will be pleasant." Since these English investors improved

their land holdings and thus raised the value of the property in their vicinity instead of merely holding their purchases for the purpose of securing the profits when other people made the improvements, they were heartily welcomed in all sections of the Northwest. A Rock Rapids paper estimated the amount expended by the Close brothers for improvements in Lyon County alone at \$100,000 for one season. As early as 1881, \$600,000 in English capital was said to have been brought to northwestern Iowa.

Business and sport, however, did not occupy the exclusive attention of these English settlers. Episcopal services were first held in Apollo Hall, but St. George's church was dedicated in July, 1882. In addition to the rector, Major Nassau Stephens of the Royal Marine Light Infantry, after twenty-two years' army service, arrived in Le Mars to act as lay reader in the church. Captain Moreton was an active leader in religious affairs and was one of the founders of the Young Men's Christian Association in Le Mars, raising some \$1500 from friends in England for that purpose.

How cosmopolitan was this little group of English settlers and investors is revealed by newspaper items concerning them. Lord Hobart returned to England to enter the army for service in the Soudan. Admiral Farquhar of the British navy arrived to visit his sons. Henry and Reginald Moreton returned to England for a year. Hugh Watson, who had a ranch on the Big Sioux River, was killed while

hunting in Scotland. A tragedy which spanned the Atlantic Ocean is glimpsed in the notice of the death of Hugh Hornby, a son of Sir Edward Hornby of Sussex, who died at Le Mars aged twenty-three years. It was a world outlook which most of these people brought to the wind-swept prairies of north-western Iowa.

The home ties, indeed, in the end recalled many of the members of the colony to England. Others moved to Minnesota, when headquarters were opened at Pipestone, following the cheap lands and the extending line of settlements upon which they depended for the success of their real estate business. Those who remained here became so identified with the communities in which they lived that the English colony as a separate social unit has ceased to exist, and only here and there in these northwestern counties does one of the old company houses recall the events of forty years ago. Similarity in race, speech, ideals, and religion has easily obliterated the distinction between English and Americans.

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