

THE PALIMPSEST

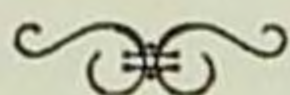
EDITED BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

VOL. XXXII

ISSUED IN JANUARY 1951

No. 1

Copyright 1951 by The State Historical Society of Iowa



The Iowa Pioneers

The Iowa pioneers belong to the third generation of settlers who, during the century that followed the American Revolution, took possession of the vast area which, extending from the Alleghanies to the Rockies and from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico, constitutes the great Valley of the Mississippi.

It was the dramatic migration known as the westward movement that carried these pioneers across the Father of Waters into the Iowa country. Indeed, it was in the Iowa country that the American pioneer made his last stand. Here between 1830 and 1870 pioneer character and culture reached its fullest expression. The year 1870 may be said to mark the close of the pioneer period in Iowa.

Who were these early settlers of Iowa, these Iowa pioneers? They were representative American pioneers, than whom Thomas H. Benton declared "there was not a better population on the face of the earth." They were of the best blood

and ranked as the best sons of the whole country. They were young, strong, and energetic — hardy, courageous, and adventurous. Caring little for the dangers of the frontier, they extended the white man's civilization, reclaimed for the industry of the world vast prairies and forests and deserts, and defended the settled country against the Indians.

The pioneers of Iowa lived in the open and looked upon the relations of man to nature with an open mind. To be sure their thoughts were more on "getting on" in this world than upon the "immortal crown of the Puritan." But from their recollections we learn that in the silent forest, in the broad prairie, in the deep blue sky, in the sentinels of the night, in the sunshine and in the storm, in the rosy dawn, in the golden sunset, and in the daily trials and battles of frontier life they saw and felt the Infinite.

Nor is it a matter of surprise that the pioneers of Iowa should have possessed these fundamental elements of character. In the first place only strong and independent souls ventured to the frontier. A weaker class could not have hoped to endure the toils, the labors, the pains, and the loneliness of pioneer life; for the hardest and at the same time most significant battles of the nineteenth century were fought with axes and plows. The frontier called for men with large capacity for adaptation — men with flexible, dynamic natures.

Especially did it require men who could break with the past, forget traditions, and easily discard inherited political and social ideas.

The Iowa pioneers were what they were, largely because the conditions of frontier life made them such. They were sincere because their environment called for an honest attitude. Having left the comforts of their old homes, traveled hundreds and thousands of miles, entered the wilderness, and endured the privations of the frontier, they were serious minded. They came for a purpose. Even to this day, their ideals of thrift and frugality pervade the commonwealth which they founded.

The broad rich prairies of Iowa and Illinois somehow seem to have widened men's views and fertilized their ideas. Said Stephen A. Douglas: "I have found my mind liberalized and my opinions enlarged when I got out on these broad prairies, with only the heavens to bound my vision, instead of having them circumscribed by the narrow ridges that surrounded the valley [in Vermont] where I was born."

Nowhere did the frontier environment exert a more marked influence than in the domain of politics. It freed men from traditions. It gave them a new and more progressive view of political life. It endowed them with liberal ideas and democratic ideals. "Claim Rights" were more important to the Iowa pioneer than "State Rights." The nation was endeared to him; and he freely gave his first

allegiance to the government that sold him land for \$1.25 an acre. In after years it was recorded of the commonwealth which he founded: "Her affections, like the rivers of her borders, flow to an inseparable Union."

Above all the frontier was a great leveler. The conditions of life there were such as to make men plain, common, unpretentious, genuine. The pioneers were too close to nature and too possessed of the enthusiasm which belongs to men and women who have conquered in a hand to hand battle with nature to bother with social distinctions. The frontier made men really democratic. It fostered the threefold ideal of equality, which constitutes the essence of American democracy in the nineteenth century, namely, Equality before the Law, Equality in the Law, Equality in making the Law.

BENJ. F. SHAMBAUGH