

## Immigrants in Iowa

Iowa received a goodly share of these immigrants from northern Europe. Before the Civil War most of them came from Britain, Ireland, and Germany. Added to this stream after the war were the Scandinavians. These were the main groups. Colonies of Dutch and Bohemians were also attracted to the state, but at the turn of the century the Germans, with 40.4 per cent, and the Scandinavians, with 23.7 per cent, constituted almost two-thirds of Iowa's foreign-born population. Today these two national segments account for 50.8 per cent of the state's relatively small group of Iowans from other lands.

The main additions to the foreign-born population of Iowa in the last half century have been the Italians and Russians, Greeks and Mexicans, many of whom were drawn to the meatpacking centers. In Sioux City, for example, the Russians constitute the largest group of foreign-born today; then come the Swedes, the Germans, and the Norwegians. However, the total Scandinavian group still exceeds the Russian. Mason City, too, has a mixture of nationalities, the Germans in the lead, followed by Greeks, Russians, Norwegians, Mexicans, Danes, and Swedes. Once again the



total Scandinavian number forms the largest group, though only slightly more than that of the German.

In Des Moines the largest single group is the Italian, with Swedes second. Again the total Scandinavian count makes it the dominant foreign-born group. Davenport is heavily German in its foreign population. This group also ranks first in Dubuque, Waterloo, Clinton, and Burlington. It should be noted that all these cities, except Waterloo, are Mississippi River towns, the oldest in the state and therefore the natural settling points for the earlier bands of immigrants. What is more significant is that these centers continued to attract later generations of German immigrants as well. The largest groups of Scandinavians are found in Des Moines, Sioux City, Council Bluffs, Fort Dodge, and Mason City; except the latter, all are central and western Iowa cities. This is an indication of the Scandinavian's arrival at a later stage in the development of the state.

However much one says about Iowa's foreign-born population, one must not lose sight of the basic fact that Iowa began and remained a state whose roots were in New England and the Middle Atlantic states, though thousands of her pioneer families had paused a generation or two in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Missouri in their trek to Iowa. Over the span of a century the proportion of foreign-born in Iowa's



total population never rose to even a fifth, as shown by the following percentages.

|             |             |            |
|-------------|-------------|------------|
| 1850 — 10.9 | 1890 — 16.9 | 1930 — 6.8 |
| 1860 — 15.7 | 1900 — 13.7 | 1940 — 4.6 |
| 1870 — 17.3 | 1910 — 12.3 | 1950 — 3.2 |
| 1880 — 16.1 | 1920 — 9.4  |            |

More attractive to immigrants than Iowa were other states in the Middle West. In 1880, Iowa ranked tenth among the states in the Union both in total and foreign-born populations. At this time Illinois and Missouri among adjoining states were the only ones that exceeded Iowa in population, but in terms of the foreign-born Illinois and the less populated states of Wisconsin and Minnesota already outranked Iowa. The population in each of the latter two states remained slightly under and did not rise above that of Iowa until after 1910 (Wisconsin) and 1930 (Minnesota); the percentage of foreign-born in each, however, was considerably higher, reaching 35.6 per cent in Minnesota in 1890. The most obvious reason for this is, of course, that these states developed a more diversified economy — mining, lumbering, shipping — which made them industrial as well as agricultural areas, thus providing more opportunities for the foreign-born. Iowa remained primarily an agricultural state, and, once settled, attracted no substantial new immigration.

But between the 1840's and 1880's when the immigrants were landseekers, why did they prefer



other states? Among the many factors involved, the first, or earliest, was simply geography. Iowa was too far west for the immigrants who came to the Middle West during the forties and fifties. Many of them arrived, after landing in New York or at a Canadian port, by way of the Great Lakes. After spending several weeks in a crowded, unsanitary, immigrant vessel, then being herded again into a Lake boat, the newcomer reached Milwaukee or Chicago weary of traveling, often ill from bad food. Chances are his savings, too, were completely used up. His one thought was to settle his family as quickly as possible, and this he did in the first available spot, which was usually a few miles inland from Lake Michigan, perhaps on one of the connecting waterways. Until railroads reached the Mississippi River in the mid-1850's the overland journey to Iowa was arduous and expensive. Furthermore, the mighty river itself was an effective barrier.

One of the most determining factors in settlement, particularly of immigrants, was the behavioral law that propelled people to seek their kind. In a strange land they wanted at least to be near or with people who spoke the same language. Once a small settlement was established, immigrants wrote to relatives in the old country urging them to come to the new land. Occasionally an enthusiastic settler, having saved enough for his fare, returned to his home valley to give living



proof of the rewards of emigration. Often he arranged for others to leave and guided them, with his small but effective collection of English words, through the intricacies of customs, boat and railroad transportation to the one-room cabin of old friends in Illinois or Wisconsin. Thus did the older settlements expand while the virgin land to the west waited to be occupied.

By the early fifties, however, wagons were rumbling across southern Wisconsin and northern Illinois on their way to a ferrying point on the Mississippi, for land prices were rising fast in the settled areas. When Fredrika Bremer visited Madison, Wisconsin, she noted that "the land in many parts . . . and in particular around Madison, where it is appropriated by the Federal government for supplying an income to the State University, is already very dear. It has been purchased by speculators at the government price, a dollar and a quarter per acre, and resold by them for not less than ten or twelve dollars per acre. 'And who will give so much for it?' I inquired of Chancellor Lathrop. 'Your countrymen,' he replied quickly. 'Your countrymen, whose sons will be freely educated at our University.'" But few of them had the money, and they, as well as the older settlers who could now sell their farms for a profit, formed caravans to go beyond the Mississippi where \$1.25 covered more ground. Every day during the summer months hundreds waited



in line at the ferries on the east bank of the river.

In the meantime, the new states and territories of the Middle West were struggling to carry on the business of government. Money was needed for roads, public buildings and schools, officials' salaries; these expenditures could be met only if enough people lived there to pay taxes. Furthermore, the states wanted railroads and knew that companies would lay their tracks only where prospects of land settlement were good. Not only money but manpower was needed to carry out the huge task of building a state, and manpower was pouring into the country from the emigrant vessels docking in Quebec, New York, Boston, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New Orleans. The new states got busy.

By the early fifties a few had established immigration agencies and were working vigorously in New York and in Europe to attract settlers. Compared to her neighbors what Iowa did was "too little and too late." In the first place, the constitutions of Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota generously gave the franchise to immigrants, who, after a year or two of residence, declared their intention to become naturalized, while Iowa required full citizenship before granting the right to vote.

In the 1844 and 1846 constitutional conventions in Iowa the right of suffrage for aliens was widely discussed and vigorously demanded by certain members of the convention and some newspapers.



But the proposals were defeated. The fact that they could not vote in Iowa until they had acquired citizenship may not have actually deterred individual emigrants from choosing this state; nevertheless, most of them had a strong feeling of pride that they were going to make their homes in a land where political rights were as freely come by as air and water, and when agents of more liberal states coupled Iowa's deficiency in this respect with the commonly accepted notion of huge areas of desert in the state, the emigrants were influenced.

Not until 1860 did Iowa appoint a commissioner of immigration, who was to reside in New York and distribute pamphlets and other information about the state. Relatively few immigrants were diverted to the state, however. Many had been contacted by agents before leaving their homelands, and upon arrival in New York their destinations — usually Wisconsin, Illinois, or Minnesota — had already been decided upon. Consequently, the commissioner advised that the only way to promote Iowa was in the foreign country itself.

Meanwhile Kansas, Missouri, Wisconsin, and Minnesota were distributing thousands of handbooks through their agents in England, Germany, and the Scandinavian countries. It is known that Minnesota agents in Norway were circulating reports that Iowa was so hot in summer that no Nor-



wegians could stand to live there. What is more important "America letters" from these states, particularly Wisconsin and Minnesota, were silently spreading over northern Europe and were even more potent than agents in determining the choice of the emigrant's future American home.

The Civil War halted all promotional activity and, of course, caused a sharp drop in immigration. Not until 1870 did Iowa resume her efforts to attract immigrants, and then with a burst of energy. The Thirteenth General Assembly passed an act to encourage immigration to the state, appropriating for that purpose the sum of \$5,000 and establishing a Board of Immigration with six commissioners. The Governor appointed men whose backgrounds — New England, New York, Germany, Holland, and Scandinavia — qualified them to give special attention to the areas from which Iowa wished to draw settlers. The Scandinavian member of the board was C. L. Clausen, a Lutheran minister from St. Ansgar who had already served a term in the Iowa legislature and whose name is writ large in the annals of Norwegian-American history in the Middle West.

The board issued a handbook, *Iowa: The Home for Immigrants*, authorizing the printing of 35,000 copies in English, 15,000 in German, 5,000 in Dutch, 6,000 in Danish (which was understood in Norway where Dano-Norwegian was the official language), and 4,000 in Swedish. Distribution



of the booklet was successfully reported by agents sent to the British Isles, Germany, and Holland. Ill fortune dogged the publication of the Scandinavian editions. After a long delay they were finally ready, only to be caught by the great Chicago fire in October, 1871, which destroyed all but a few hundred copies. Consequently, the two agents sent to the Scandinavian countries — Martin N. Clausen, son of the commissioner, and Theodore K. Hunby of Worth County — were hampered in their work. Clausen translated portions of the pamphlet and published them in the leading Scandinavian journals, reporting that he had "awakened much interest in regard to Iowa." From Norway Hunby wrote to the board giving "assurances of the increasing favor of Iowa with the people of that country."

Meanwhile, Governor Samuel Merrill of Iowa was instrumental in getting the governors of the Midwestern states to call for a national immigration convention to consider ways to increase "facilities for emigrants coming to the West, as well as to protect them from the impositions so constantly practiced upon them at the seaports." The Governor and several members of the Board of Immigration were among the delegates from twenty-two states, two territories, and the District of Columbia who met at Indianapolis in November, 1870.

For three years money and energy were ex-



pended, then interest again slumped. The legislature failed to provide funds for promotion of immigration, and Iowa, bedeviled in the mid-seventies by wet years, poor crops, grasshoppers, and low prices witnessed a sizable exodus of settlers who headed for "warmer Kansas and cheaper Nebraska," or for the Dakotas. The first settlers in Traill County, North Dakota, in the early seventies were dissatisfied Norwegians who had originally settled in Mitchell County, Iowa. The writer's own Norwegian grandparents, after a short stay in their first American home in northern Iowa, caught the Dakota fever during this period and joined the oxcart caravans.

The Iowa legislature, unable because of the hard times to appropriate funds for a board of immigration, gave agents of land and railroad companies the authority to use the name of Iowa in their efforts to attract settlers to the state. These "honorary" commissioners worked for the mutual benefit of the state and their companies until in 1880 a commissioner of immigration was again appointed. His policy met with opposition from some quarters. Then, unfortunately, immigration and temperance issues got into the same political pot, bringing about a head-on clash between the leaders of the foreign-born groups and the advocates of prohibition. A wave of antiforeign sentiment swept over the state; measures to continue immigration promotion found no support in the



1882 legislature and were never again revived. Thus did Iowa's lack of a consistent policy and her fluctuating interest in securing immigrants partly succeed in directing the immigrant tide elsewhere.

Railroad companies were probably even more important than the states (although they frequently worked together) in spreading propaganda for certain areas and actually bringing immigrants from Europe to the American West to buy and settle on their lands. The Illinois Central's program of colonization was one of the first and most successful, and certainly it was a factor in making Illinois the stronghold of Swedish life and culture in the Middle West. The amazing Jim Hill was responsible in large measure for settling his Great Northern Empire in Minnesota and the Dakotas with Norwegian and Swedish farmers. Settlement in Iowa, except for the western part of the state, had preceded the railroads, and the efforts of the companies were not as intense. The Burlington Railroad, however, through agents in England and Germany brought a few immigrant groups to southwestern Iowa. A string of Swedish colonies, too, were founded along the Burlington route in the southern counties through the efforts of Swedish-American land agents.

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