

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

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Iowa in 1858

The pioneers who settled in Iowa prior to 1848 found the steamboat, the covered wagon, and the stagecoach their only means of transportation and communication. For those who had come from beyond the Alleghenies this was especially difficult, the great distance separating them from family and friends added to the lonesomeness of the frontier. The steamboat was the swiftest means of communication with such points as St. Louis and New Orleans on the Mississippi, and with Louisville, Cincinnati, and Pittsburgh on the Ohio. The first railroad had been constructed west of Chicago in 1848 but only twelve miles of track were laid that year. It was not until 1852 that the Iron Horse linked the Atlantic with Chicago.

Meanwhile, a swifter means of communication was becoming available with the invention of the telegraph in 1844. The popularity of the telegraph is attested by its rapid spread throughout the nation east of the Mississippi. By 1846 St. Louis and New Orleans had been reached by "Light-

ning" and "magnetic despatches" were being sent to these points the instant the news happened on the Atlantic seaboard. In August of 1848, a scant four years after Anne Ellsworth sent her historic telegraph message between Washington and Baltimore, Iowa was linked to the Atlantic — one line reaching Dubuque from Chicago while the other came north from St. Louis to link Keokuk, Fort Madison, Burlington and Muscatine with the eastern seaboard. The mysteries of telegraphic communication caused as much wonder and speculation to the pioneers of 1848 as did television to Iowans a century later.

In the decade that followed the arrival of the telegraph Iowans witnessed other phenomena in the realm of transportation and communication. On February 22, 1854, the first railroad to link the Atlantic with the Mississippi was completed to Rock Island — directly opposite Davenport. The following year, in 1855, the Iron Horse had been extended from Lake Michigan to Dubuque, Clinton, and Burlington. In 1857 the Milwaukee was completed to Prairie du Chien, opposite McGregor. Thus, within the space of three years, Iowa river towns had been tapped at five points by railroad. In contrast, only four points between Keokuk and New Orleans had been linked with the Atlantic by rail.

Although Iowans were beginning to feel the effects of the Panic of 1857 a note of confidence

prevailed in 1858. The Burlington *Hawkeye* was especially optimistic:

There are many long faces among the farmers in Iowa at this time — what, with the panic, which brought down the prices of their farms from imaginary figures to sober realities, tested by actual production, and greatly reduced their means of paying debts — with an almost total failure of wheat and oats and the loss, by reason of continuous rains, of an opportunity to raise a full corn crop upon flat land — there is truly some cause for farmers feeling blue. But despondency will not pay debts or repair disaster. — There is but one sensible thing to do. Pick the flint and try it again. Although there may at this time be more sellers than buyers, and Iowa lands, improved and unimproved, going at an awful discount, still they are every day increasing in real value. Four or five Railroads are progressing into our State and will soon reach our western border. Cattle, hogs, sheep, mules and horses, can be set down in New York or Boston in six days from their pens on the Des Moines. — Butter, eggs, poultry, fruit, and almost every article of value grown or produced can be transported to Chicago, New York, and the east, with profit to the producer. It seems to us that in view of this, in view of the fact that as a State we owe next to nothing, and as individuals, and as a community, not more than will require one good crop to pay, we ought not to be cast down by one disastrous season, or floored by one panic.

Despite hard times the *Hamilton Freeman* (Webster City) of July 8, 1858, was impressed with the activity and bustle on the Iowa frontier. Buildings were being occupied by enterprising merchants and the Western Stage Company made it possible to reach Dubuque in three days from

Webster City. In a brief note entitled "Westward Ho!" the editor declared:

A large number of teams are daily passing through this place, carrying merchandise, emigrants and their families, implements of husbandry, &c. Since the roads became passable there has been a perfect rush. This is a wise movement, for there is not a better region of country under the sun than north-western Iowa.

While Iowans were making every effort to improve transportation and communication in their own backyard, they watched with keen anticipation another spectacular event that promised to virtually unite the world — namely, the Atlantic Cable. The success or failure of this Herculean undertaking would be known before the year 1858 dimmed from their view.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN