

When Men Were Hard to Get

It was a common experience on every American frontier that men outnumbered women, frequently by a large majority. This same situation prevailed in Iowa, particularly before statehood was achieved in 1846, and especially in such areas as the lead mining country around Dubuque. The arrival of a contingent of single women in Iowa was the subject of comment in a nationally read magazine—*The Spirit of the Times* on September 14, 1844.

The Way They Marry Out West

A western newspaper says (Thorpe is our authority) that the arrival of 41 ladies, all at one time, in Iowa, has caused "a sensation." We think it should. But the manner of "paying addresses" and getting "hitched," is what we want to come at. It is said to be done in a business-like way, something in this wise:—When a steamboat-load of ladies is coming in "at the wharf," the gentlemen on shore make proposals to the ladies through speaking trumpets, something like the following:—"Miss with blue ribbon on your bonnet, will you take me?" "Hallo thar, gal with a cinnamon-colored shawl! if agreeable we will jine." The ladies in the meantime get ashore and are married at the "hotel," the parties arranging themselves as the squire sings out, "Sort yourselves! sort yourselves!" A great country, that "Far West."

The need of women on the Iowa frontier was recognized from the beginnings of permanent settlement on June 1, 1833. Frequently the males were considerably older than the females who were ready and willing to be married. On October 27, 1838, the editor of the Dubuque *Iowa News* commented on the sad state of affairs in Scott County.

"So Fades the Lovely Blooming Flower."—

In Scott county, Iowa, after a residence of four years, the last single lady found a market on the 10th ult. A correspondent writes, "our gentlemen are three to one, and so anxious are our settlers for wives that they never ask a single lady her age. All they require is *teeth*." (Exchange paper.)

What a story this fellow tells, as many a rosy cheeked, pearly teethed damsel in Scott county can testify. It is also a slander on the bachelors, who, like those in any other country, choose wives for their good qualities, views consonant with their own, and a reciprocity of kind and tender feelings, without placing an improper weight upon personal appearance. The general disposition of some persons to make sport of the manners and customs of the people of a new country, renders them fit tools in the hands of impudent ignoramuses discarded and shunned by prudent females. Disproportioned as the sexes are in Iowa, the heart of a bachelor is too well worthy that of a LADY to be thrown away on the female companions of a person so destitute of truth as this lying 'correspondent.'

Doubtless there was good reason for the Scott County lass expressing her resentment at the above account of the dearth of women in Daven-

port. The situation at Dubuque had been far more acute, leading to what was probably the first elopement in Iowa. It happened that a young Iowa lass was influenced by her parents to marry a much older man. Not long after her marriage the young lady took note of a brawny, good looking young miner, who in turn cast deeply appreciative eyes at her. The two met clandestinely, became deeply enamored, and soon agreed that they were meant for each other. They determined to elope.

The event actually took place in September, 1835. While her husband rested, lulled to sleep, it is said, by the bewitching strains of "Coming thro' the Rye," the young woman made ready for her departure with the younger man. A local bard has thus best expressed her feelings in a parody on the Scotch ballad:

Every lassie has her laddie;
None they say have I,
And yet there's one—(I hear his step,)
I'm off, old chap—goodbye.

The persistence of the stories relating to the dearth of unmarried women in Iowa continued for over forty years. The actual male and female population in Iowa is shown by the following figures:

	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880
Male	24,355	101,052	354,493	625,917	848,136
Female	18,757	91,162	320,420	568,103	776,479

The following newspaper story, containing an irate Guthrie County maiden's letter of protest against the proposal to import Massachusetts "Old Maids," received widespread publicity and possibly some new subscribers to the *Iowa State Register* of Des Moines.

Iowa is one of the twenty-three States of the Union in which the masculine sex predominates, the late census showing an excess of males of just two and a tenth per cent. This information has excited the press of the State to unite in a cordial invitation to the surplus females of the Eastern States to emigrate to Iowa. The result is no little indignation on the part of those Iowa maidens who are still in the market despite the male surplus. A letter published from a Massachusetts girl describing the only kind of husband which would be acceptable in that quarter was too much for one of the Iowa sisterhood, who sent the following vigorous protest to the editor of the *Iowa State Register*:

I wish to "speak my piece" on the subject of "surplus" men in Iowa. There is another side to the subject—one that interests the single women who are here now. We are decidedly opposed to having 50,000 women, or even 10,000, sent in here to take the few men who can be induced to marry.

I have not had a "beau" this winter, and am not willing to share my chance for a husband with those of Massachusetts ladies (it is hopeless enough now), for a new face always attracts attention, even if not so pretty as the old one. I think any Iowa man answering the description given by A, etc., of Boston, can very easily find an Iowa girl as pretty, neat and good-natured as those Massachusetts "old maids." We are not so particular about

height, weight or color of hair, so they have all the other accomplishments.

You need not pass this by as an "idle tale" or the "growl" of some ill-natured, "flat-nosed," red-headed "old maid." I am a little past 22, and to put it modestly, nice looking; can sew, knit, teach school, play the organ, etc., and am willing to do my part toward supporting a husband. Where I live there are four marriageable men, two widowers, one 50 years old and smokes, the other 30 years old and drinks whiskey; two bachelors, one about 40 or 50 with two old maid sisters to support, and the other not intelligent enough to be a Republican—in fact, he is a whining, howling Greenbacker, who thinks everything is going to smash and won't marry. Do take pity on the single Iowa girls and get a "surplus man" for each one of us before sending to Massachusetts and we will ever remember you with grateful hearts, and have those same men subscribe for the Register.

A Guthrie County Girl.

Not all "Old Maids" in Iowa could blame their lot on a dearth of men. Sometimes the young maids were a bit too choosy, a fact which a Dubuque editor brought out in the October 18, 1838, issue of the *Iowa News*.

I never looked at an *old* maid without thinking of the lesson that was read to a *young* one in one of our Southern States. The story, as I heard it, runs thus:

A very pretty, a very proud heiress had a good many suitors, and was so long making up her mind which to have, that some of them gave up the chase. She was waiting for the chance of an offer from someone wealthier than anyone that wooed her. The meanwhile, she was becoming *passe*. Her uncle, a shrewd man of the world, spoke

to her one day, remonstrating against her folly in not accepting the suitor. She laughed and said there was full time enough, and that a better offer would yet come. "Very well," said her uncle, "enough is said on the subject. Go into the canebrake, and cut me the best cane you can get. But, mind, you must not turn your back to cut one." The young lady smiled at the oddness of this stipulation, and proceeded to execute his behest.

She entered the canebrake, and was met by her uncle at the other end. She handed him a stunted, shabby cane. "This," said he, "is a sorry cane. Were there none better to be found?" "There were plenty," said she, "I saw many fine canes at first, but I did not cut one of them because, to say the truth, I hoped that as I went on, I might see better ones.—But they got worse as I went on, and at last I was obliged to take this rather than bring none." Her uncle replied, "This is exactly your own case. You refuse good offers now, in the vague hope of having better. Life is like that canebrake. You will not find better offers as you advance—just as you did not find better canes—and at last you may be compelled to put up with a middling one, or take none at all." What reply the lady made is not recorded—but she married before she was a month older.

Not all men were handsome or wealthy. Girls were constantly reminded that there were many manly virtues that should be considered in choosing a husband. The *Iowa News* of August 5, 1837, must have been particularly helpful in steering marriage-minded maidens into a safe and snug harbor. The editor's advice was aptly captioned:

How To Choose a Good Husband

Girls, when you see a young man of modest, respectful,

retiring manners, with unpretending yet noble independence of mind, of amiable and pious disposition, not given to pride or vanity—such a one will make a good husband for he will be the same to his wife after marriage that he was before.

When you see a young man who would take a wife for the value of herself,—for her beauties of mind and purity of heart and not for the dazzle of wealth, that man will make a good husband, for his affection will never lessen, and years will but serve to strengthen his attachment and open new fountains in the heart, which shall murmur sweetly to the ocean of continual happiness.

Never make money an object of marriage; if you do, depend upon it, as a balance for that good, you will get a bad husband—one whose love and ambition will soon be irretrievably engrossed in reckless schemes of speculation, to the utter disregard and neglect of kinder sympathies of nature, and more social enjoyments of life. When you see a young man who is tender and affectionate, and endowed with happy intellect, no matter what circumstances in life are, he is really worth the winning—take him, who can, girls, for he will make a good husband—if you do not improve such an occasion, you may live to learn and regret that you had but one opportunity.

While there were not many men who would possess all the virtues listed in the above tribute, there were doubtless a large number who exhibited a goodly number of them. Furthermore, it should be pointed out that such men invariably would demand that their partner-for-life would possess personal attributes that would be pleasing to her liege lord. On May 13, 1871, the *Estherville Northern Vindicator* declared:

A bachelor says that all he could ask for in a wife would be a good temper, sound health, good understanding, agreeable physiognomy, pretty figure, good connection, domestic habits, resources of amusements, good spirits, conversational talents, elegant manners, money!

Despite some facetious intonations in the above there can be little doubt that the same standards would hold today. Love and mutual attraction are always basic, but a number of ingredients always form the mystical compound out of which these grow. The *power of love* may be described in the song—"Love Makes the World Go Round." With this *power of love* there must also go mutual and readily accepted responsibilities, best expressed in the song—

"Love and Marriage, Love and Marriage
Go Together Like a Horse and Carriage."

May it ever be thus.